The New Criterion

March 1987

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The Met's 20th-century folly

by Hilton Kramer

folly . . . A costly undertaking having an absurd or ruinous outcome.
—*The American Heritage Dictionary*

Of the many questions to be raised about the new Lila Acheson Wallace Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, surely the most fundamental is: *Who needs it?* To which question we have yet to be given a cogent or credible reply. Here are twenty-two galleries, some of them very large and none of them very beautiful, which have been built at great expense to house an immense permanent collection of twentieth-century art. Yet the Met, as everyone knows, does not have even the shadow of a twentieth-century collection of the size and substance which this elephantine facility calls for, and the likelihood of the museum *ever* acquiring such a comprehensive collection is exceedingly remote.

Moreover, the need for such an outsize public collection in a city already extremely rich in twentieth-century museum holdings of great range and quality is by no means self-evident. What, even in the best-case scenario, is to be expected from this costly effort? We know for a fact that in certain key areas of twentieth-century art—Cubist painting and sculpture, for example, and the work of such modern masters as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Matisse, and Miró—the Met stands no chance of equaling what our other New York museums already have in place. The same is probably true for the history of Constructivism, Dada, and Surrealism (though there is no shortage of work representing the dregs of those movements). And some of the things that might, by cynical appeals to the vanity of private collectors, be diverted to the Met as a result of promiscuous promises for elaborate installations, sumptuous publications, prestigious study facilities, and the like—a Futurist collection, say, that for more years than one cares to recall has been dangled before the eyes of museum directors the country over, or a Neo-Expressionist collection guaranteed to bring greater glory to the donor than to the unlucky institution destined to be its ultimate custodian—such acquisitions will do nothing to alter the essential situation.

What is really worth having in such collections would, in the normal course of things, very likely come to one or another major museum whether the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing existed or not. The only thing which the Met's intervention in this process makes absolutely certain is that the cost of acquiring such privately held works of art—the cost in ridiculous and unworkable guarantees to the donor, if not the cost in actual dollars—will be far higher and far harder to live with than would otherwise be the case. What is certain, too, is that the result for the Met will be the kind of lopsided twentieth-century collection—swollen at the margins and vacant at the center—that will stand as a permanent mockery of the museum's claim to an "encyclopedic" outlook on art.

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Meanwhile, what the Met has actually given us in the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing —not in some hypothetical future, but right now in the inaugural installation of this vast facility—does nothing to allay our expectation of the disasters to come. It was obviously a ghastly mistake on the part of the museum to open twenty-two galleries all at once when there was hardly enough work of museum or near-museum quality in hand to fill a quarter of that space. To create the illusion of a respectable showing in the remaining galleries—which in sheer square footage are larger than the space available in many existing museums of twentieth-century art—the Met apparently settled on three procedures. The first was to borrow whatever it could from private collectors to make up some of the more egregious historical gaps in its own holdings. The second was to spend a lot of money on new stuff, not only as a means of filling large quantities of gallery space (something which our artists, whatever their other failings, can always be counted upon to do), but also to foster the impression that the Met will henceforth take an active role in the contemporary art scene. The third—and surely the most desperate of the stratagems the museum has resorted to—was to give the curators the unenviable assignment of ransacking the Met's capacious storerooms to see what, among the many discarded and forgotten objects which have been gathering dust over the course of the present century, could be dredged up and pressed into service as temporary exhibits until something better comes along.

It was not to be expected that such makeshift measures would solve the essential problem, and it therefore comes as no surprise that they most emphatically do not. In some remote provincial outpost, perhaps, where the masterworks of twentieth-century art are rarely seen and the public has little opportunity to acquire an understanding of what its achievements consist of, it is just barely possible that a museological bluff of this sort might have succeeded. But for the Metropolitan Museum to attempt such a bluff in New York is something else. It suggests, if not actual incompetence—which, alas, cannot be entirely ruled out—then a cynical disregard for the kind of standards we have a right to expect from an institution that makes such a large claim on the public's respect and on the city's resources.

The truth is, there is hardly a single aspect of this new facility at the Met which does not signify some conspicuous failure of taste and intelligence. From our first steps into the bright, vulgar, shopping-mall lobby—a long, narrow passageway featuring the usual profusion of posters, publications, toys, reproductions, ladies' scarves, etc.—which must be traversed before we can gain entrance to the Wallace Wing, we are on notice that the dignity of aesthetic experience will not be the uppermost consideration here. The first note sounded is decidedly that of commerce, and the comedy of it lies, of course, in the fact that the visitors to the Wallace Wing are expected to make their selection of "souvenirs" even before they have had a glimpse of the objects in the galleries.

The actual entrance to the Wallace Wing is no more assuring. In a wood-paneled space more appropriate to an office lobby or a corporate boardroom than to a museum gallery we encounter the first work of art on display—Gaston Lachaise's wonderful *Standing Woman* of 1927. The trouble here is not with the quality of the object—part of the recent Scofield Thayer bequest—but with the way it has been treated, or mistreated. The placement and lighting of this sculpture are simply atrocious, with disfiguring shadows all but destroying the integrity of its forms. (Needless to say, no view of the back is even possible.) What we are offered, in short, is less a view of a commanding sculpture than the bronze effigy of a hostess welcoming us to a party.

Then begins the long and hapless trek through the endless succession of ill-designed galleries. It is not enough to say that these galleries, designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates, are dull and undistinguished. Their effect on the museum vis-

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itor is too emphatically negative for that description to suffice. With one exception—the glass-roofed sculpture court—there is a grinding banality to these gallery spaces which adds a distinct increment of tedium to a museum experience badly in need of something to make the visitor's spirit soar. As for the sculpture court itself, it proves to be an ungainly, corridorlike space too high for its width and altogether unsuitable to the sculptures installed in it. This is as true for the immense Louise Nevelson construction, which in any case needs a more shadowy atmosphere than is possible in this light-drenched space, as it is for the Timothy Woodman painted wall relief, which calls for a more intimate setting than is possible here. The curators have compounded these infelicities by covering the walls of this gallery with immense paintings by Matta, Andy Warhol, and Al Held, which, in the case of Held's *Greek Garden,* literally cannot be seen because of the blinding light that floods in from the skylight just above it.

Which brings us to the problem of the installation style throughout the Wallace Wing. William S. Lieberman, who has served as chairman of the Department of 20th Century Art at the Met since 1979, has always been thought to have a special gift for this task, but the sheer scale of the Wallace Wing has clearly defeated even his considerable talents. Where the museum's holdings are strongest—in the Stieglitz collection of early American modernists, and in the Abstract Expressionist paintings—he mercifully plays it straight, and the galleries devoted to these works are surely the best of the lot. But elsewhere Mr. Lieberman's penchant for eccentric and unilluminating juxtaposition, for mingling quality and triviality and setting real achievement against its trashy simulacrum, begins by looking merely comical and ends—all those many galleries later—by looking simply desperate. The eye that finds some gratification in placing Botero's vulgar *Dancing in Colombia* in close proximity to Nadelman's elegant *Tango* (they are both about dancing, you see), or in putting Dali's ghastly *Madonna* in the same room with Max Beckmann's *Beginning* or James Rosenquist's *House of Fire* in the same room with Milton Avery's *Speedboat's Wake* (one of Avery's greatest pictures), is not an eye that can any longer be relied upon to make the necessary aesthetic distinctions.

What is finally most depressing about the Wallace Wing is the thought that a great many visitors to the Met—people who are innocent of any real knowledge of the achievements of modern art but who are nonetheless curious to see what these have been—will come away from their exhausting trek through these galleries with the mistaken impression that they have now seen the real thing. The awful irony here is that only a few connoisseurs—who have no need for the Wallace Wing and will avoid it like the plague—will have either the knowledge or the stamina to search out what is first-rate in this museological carnival. This is not, I think, what is usually meant by serving the public.

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Vladimir Nabokov: ardor and art

by Fernanda Eberstadt

The life of the Russian emigré novelist Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is one complicated by artifice, concealment, invention, and subterfuge. Nabokov is one of the more theatrical and self-flaunting of serious modern writers. If Saint Paul once wrote that he did not live, but died daily, one might say of the novelist Nabokov that he did not live, but re-invented himself daily. In his later years a celebrated lecturer and literary lion, Nabokov painstakingly arranged every public statement and appearance, rewriting his interviews with journalists and sometimes denying afterward (with threat of legal action) that he had made the statements recorded on tape or film. He revised three times over into a more pleasing picture his memoirs of his first forty years: its two sequels, describing his American experiences, Nabokov himself suppressed. His fiction is walled with false mirrors and paved with teasing trails designed deliberately to confound the prospective biographer—indeed, a number of his novels are prefaced with introductions rather coyly fending off the "sleuths" or "the little Freudian" who might seek personal revelations in the author's art. Moreover, in a more unequivocal effort at privacy, Nabokov in his will stipulated that his personal papers—including those same volumes of memoirs and a novel which his son Dmitri claims to be one of the author's best—might not be published until fifty years after the deaths of his wife and son (b. 1932), a provision that echoes the century-long ban on his own private archives imposed by Nabokov's raging bête noir, Sigmund Freud.

Consequently, the present-day biographer of so complex, gamesome, and devious an artist finds himself awkwardly hindered in his investigations. As the Nabokov scholar Andrew Field declares in his recently published *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*[1]—the first complete biography of the novelist—"There are grounds to suppose that Nabokov never intended that the details of his life be known. It is the purpose of this book to describe that secret life." The first part of this proposition is something of an understatement; the second is a promise that Field is not able to make good on—I suspect because Nabokov, although an avid womanizer and enthusiastic literary feuder, probably did not have much relevant life outside his work.

Andrew Field is the Australian-American author of a biography of Djuna Barnes. He is also widely considered the most accomplished of Nabokov scholars and has published two authoritative studies on the Russian novelist's life and work. The present volume is a rather casual although always engaging assemblage of literary criticism and biographical information.

A large amount of *VN* is devoted to the examination of individual stories, novels,

1 *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, by Andrew Field; Crown, 417 pages, $19.95.

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and poems. Field's approach to Nabokov's work is pleasingly straightforward and free of critical cant. Although much of his criticism of necessity involves detective work—the unraveling of the trilingual puns and anagrams that encrust Nabokov's fiction, and the uncovering of the literary sources whose influences Nabokov himself laboriously denied—Field nonetheless avoids becoming overly internal in his textual analysis, maintaining instead a salutary distance from his subject. To his great credit, Field treats Nabokov's work as would an intelligent reader, frank in his likes and dislikes, and not as a professional Nabokovian, gloating proprietarily over every verbal jest.

For biographical material, Field draws upon Nabokov's own memoirs, on extensive interviews with the author and his wife (who has repudiated the book), and on the taped recollections of Nabokov's relatives, students, friends, and colleagues, each of whose anecdotes light up piquant though quite different aspects of the artist. Field wisely chooses to quote directly from his interviews: a currently fashionable biographical method which here gives the reader an opportunity to judge for himself the credibility of these sometimes unreliable reporters and to enjoy at firsthand the highly idiosyncratic emigré cadences which mark the speech of Nabokov and his friends.

Although Field's biography is sketchy, offering (as its author himself admits) "occasional scaffolding where one would prefer a finished room," the book is acute in both its critical judgments and its understanding of Nabokov's complicated relations with the world. By the end of *VN,* one has the rare sense of having gained a vivid familiarity with the novelist, in all his monstrous vanity, his desperation to shock, his petty vindictiveness and vulgarity, his manic energy, playfulness, charm, and his wholehearted devotion to literature.

Biographies of great writers often tend to shake one's reverence for their subjects: great writers are often mean men, and it's difficult for their biographers to unveil that creative process by which such men in their works transcend themselves. It is *VN*'s virtue that although Andrew Field is very harsh about Nabokov as a man and a writer, his book leaves one with a portrait of an artist Olympian in both failings and accomplishments.

It is now ten years since Nabokov's death, and the world into which he was born is long gone. Andrew Field's biography provides us with a good occasion both to look at a life whose main necessities were determined by revolution and world war, and to assess the nature of Nabokov's literary achievement and his place among twentieth-century novelists.

Vladimir Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg in 1899. His father came from a minor aristocratic family of judges and statesmen; his mother's family were rich merchants. Nabokov's father, also a Vladimir, was a liberal, a freemason, a jurist, and a statesman who served in the Kadet Party that flourished in pre-Bolshevik Russia and who, before the Revolution, published spirited denunciations of the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, of Bloody Sunday (in which several hundred petitioning workers were mowed down by the military), and of the trial of Mendel Beilis in 1913 for the supposed "ritual" murder of a Christian child.

In 1922, three years after the family went into exile, Vladimir Nabokov, Sr., was murdered in a Berlin lecture hall defending the leftist Pavel Miliukov from a Russian fascist's bullets.

His son in a sense never recovered either from his father's death or from an enduring sense of his own light weight, as compared to the older Nabokov's courageous public service. From a very early age, the young Nabokov staked out for himself an area—literature—in which he alone could excel, and he eschewed all but the most flippant expression of his political convictions. These convictions, inherited from his father, consisted principally of a hatred of tyranny, cant, and bigotry—a position which in modern American terms translated into anti-Communist conservatism. It should be emphasized, however, that despite the re-

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current outbursts against Marx and Freud, Nabokov's novels are essentially anti-political in their insistence on the supremacy, even, one might say, the sole reality of art and the individual talent.

Nabokov graduated from Cambridge University in 1922 and rejoined the Russian emigration in Berlin, which included such eminent writers as Ivan Bunin and the poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevich. There, Nabokov soon gained considerable stature as a Russian-language novelist and critic working under the pseudonym V. Sirin. It is characteristic of Nabokov that his later English lectures, essays, and memoirs frequently contain rapturous praise of this same V. Sirin's work. (Nabokov considered himself his own best critic.) In 1925, Nabokov married the Russian-Jewish Vera Slonim, who acted as his lifelong secretary and who appears in Field's book chiefly as a kind of fiercely obdurate goalie blocking all attacks or intrusions upon her husband's person and work, and occasionally silencing even Nabokov's indiscretions. In one mutually revealing anecdote, Nabokov is described gaily informing a common-room crowd, "I am now going to write about the love-life of Siamese twins," to which Vera replies, "No, you're not." Despite Nabokov's infidelities, their fifty-two-year marriage appears to have been one of those tightly entwined and deeply symbiotic unions whose impenetrable privacy is a proof of its vitality.

In 1937, the Nabokovs left Berlin for France; in 1940 they fled Paris on the eve of Occupation with their infant son for the United States. There Nabokov became a lifelong American patriot, even sending Lyndon Johnson a telegram (from Swiss retirement) encouraging his prosecution of the war in Vietnam. He taught at Wellesley, at Harvard briefly, and at Cornell. At these universities, he gave immensely popular lectures on world literature.[2] In 1959, the proceeds from his best-selling *Lolita* enabled Nabokov to retire from teaching and move to Montreux, where he died in 1977.

Nabokov is the author of some twenty-eight volumes of fiction, poetry, translation, biography, interviews, and criticism. He is a controversial and idiosyncratic translator, a respected (although also idiosyncratic) lepidopterist who classified a number of hitherto-undiscovered butterflies, a passionate and erratic critic, and one of the very best English-language novelists of this century.

He is also probably the only novelist in history to have enjoyed two full careers in two languages—even Joseph Conrad left us no Polish works. (If Hitler hadn't invaded Paris, the second language might have been French.) Nabokov published eight Russian novels and three volumes of short stories during his eighteen years in Germany. Had he stopped writing at the age of thirty-seven when, in provident preparation for a New World future, he composed in Paris his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* he would nonetheless have left behind a name as one of the more energetic, accomplished, and even prolific of twentieth-century Russian emigré novelists.

Luckily, almost all Nabokov's Russian novels are today in print, in sturdy paperback editions beautifully translated, sometimes by his son, sometimes by Michael Scammell, and often with the author's assistance and with his own retrospective prefaces. These prefaces, delivered in Nabokov's best public manner—a mixture of preening self-admiration, playfulness, and insult (of psychoanalysts, publishers, reviewers, and literary biographers)—consist mostly of useful pointers to the succeeding work's most cunning features: those hidden structural motifs and literary allusions which "persons who move their lips when reading" might otherwise miss.

Nabokov's Russian fiction displays in vitro many of the novelist's most pronounced gifts and enduring preoccupations. Of his novels of this period the two most effective are *The Defense* (1929) and *The Gift*

2 These lectures have been posthumously collected and published as *Lectures on Literature*, edited by Fredson Bowers (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

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(1937)[3]—books whose extreme diversity gives one a fit sense of the young Nabokov's narrative breadth. *The Defense,* a mystery or horror tale after the manner of Edgar Allan Poe, portrays the almost Faustian self-destruction of Luzhin, an autistic hulk who from an early age is consumed by a mania for the game of chess. The novel, which structurally enacts a chess match between grandmasters, sets forth Luzhin's career as an exile and aging chess prodigy touring the capitals of Europe and portrays his descent into a chessboard hell of lunacy and, eventually, suicide (checkmate).

Crisp, clear, and luminous in its imagery, and endowed with a radiant simplicity of prose, *The Defense* constitutes a strangely stirring and horribly comical portrait of artistic/demonic possession, or, in Nabokov's words, "the sterility of . . . recondite genius." More accurately one might say that, like most of Nabokov's work, the book is not about genius but rather about the cruel and sometimes tragic nature of *near*-genius: about those grotesque and self-wounded casualties of an almost first-rate talent, those Phaetons who steal the Apollonian chariot and are seared to cinders by a heavenly fire not theirs to master.

The Defense is an uncanny piece of work, a novel of almost perfect pitch. Nabokov is adept at interleaving an outwardly oblivious hero's internal states of epiphany and dementia with slivers of acutely rendered social aperçus and settings: the tournaments in seedy Central European chess clubs haunted by impresarios and Soviet agents; the ersatz Old Russia, replete with polar bear rugs, gaudy Easter eggs, and tar-black icons, concocted by the sentimental cunning of an emigré banker's wife in her Berlin salon. Such social externalities glint at us through Luzhin's monomania much as in an intimate Flemish portrait we see reflected in a sitting-room mirror the artist himself, receding hallways, Delft courtyards, sky, and rooftops.

In many ways, *The Defense* is a work characteristic of the later Nabokov: it is an allegory of artistic talent, a mystery thriller, a tale of hurtling obsession and self-destruction that is infused paradoxically with Nabokov's own sunny buoyance and his merry-macabre bursts of wit. Side by side with what the author in one preface calls "my sweet temper" and a penchant for lovable sports of nature, however, is that trait which Nabokov's critics deem "heartlessness": a certain icy spite toward more ordinary people's pretensions and self-delusions, here unleashed upon Luzhin's parents, wife, and in-laws—a spite whose fury increasingly threatens to topple the bizarre equanimity of Nabokov's novels and to shatter the crystal sphere of his invented worlds.

Although *The Gift*—Nabokov's last and most ambitious Russian novel—shares many of the same themes and sentiments of *The Defense,* compared to the latter's stark foreground, it is a storehouse crammed with anecdote, jokes, characters, business, and, above all, the freight of literary memory and allusion.

A thoroughly modernist period piece, the book's timbre and its narrative drift frequently recall James Joyce's *Ulysses,* Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities,* and a dozen less distinguished works of the first few decades of this century. It could only have been written by a foreigner living in a Central European capital before the war, and hence represents something of a late—and last—bloom of a fertile genre.

The Gift is interesting, however, not only for its echoes but for its omissions. Written in Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II, the novel suggests only perhaps by its rather demoralized apoliticism and sour view of Berlin the looming presence of what Nabokov in his later presence calls "a nauseous dictatorship."

The story is that of the young exile Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, an aspiring writer living hand-to-mouth in the White Russian community in Berlin, who in the course of

3 *The Defense* was translated by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (Perigree Books, 1964). Scammell and Nabokov also translated *The Gift* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963).

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the novel progresses from lyric poet to epic biographer to satirist and finally to author of the book we now read. Large chunks of the novel are taken up by cultural criticism, biography, verse, and even the minutes of a faction-torn Emigré Writers' Meeting. By Nabokov's own admission the book also enacts a short history of Russian literature, with one section devoted to an imitation and critique of the poetry of Pushkin, one to Gogol's grotesque hyperrealism, and another—a novel within a novel—to Fyodor's burlesque of the life of the nineteenth-century radical materialist N. G. Chernyshevsky.

Nabokov's humorous savaging of Chernyshevsky, whose critical philosophy was to influence Lenin and the Bolsheviks and lay the groundwork for a Marxist-Leninist "aesthetics" in the Soviet Union, may be read as his parting message to the Russian emigré community, which revered Chernyshevsky's work. Not just Bolshevism, Nabokov is saying, but all radicalism, even in its more romantic nineteenth-century guise, is a nasty farce. The White Russian emigration was unappreciative of this lesson: the magazine *Sovremennye Zapiski,* which serialized *The Gift,* excluded Nabokov's chapter on Chernyshevsky. It should be noted, however, that although Nabokov's grudge against Communism's nineteenth-century prophets is political, his revenge is aesthetic: Chernyshevsky is ridiculed for being fat, smelly, a cuckold, and a poor literary critic to boot.

The Gift is very much a portrait of the artist as a young man—a young man whose native sloth and vast ambition are aggravated by an exile which sequesters him firmly in what Nabokov here calls "the hothouse paradise of the past." Nabokov deftly veers from the hero's fevered internal life—his scintillating repartees to invisible critics, his imaginary treks through Central Asia with his dead father, a famous explorer and naturalist, his encounters with strange women—to Fyodor's rather bare physical existence in a foreign city where he gives language lessons to retired businessmen, attends shabby literary salons, and avoids his landlady.

The novel ends on a hilarious note of redemption and promise, with Fyodor's bungling elopement with Zina Mertz, a Russian-Jewish girl who loves him for his work. The young lady's Jewishness is a significant feature in this Nazi-era novel, since it occasions in the author a display of that ardently protective sympathy for the Jews and rage against anti-Semitism which, as Andrew Field reveals in his biography, was a salient feature of Nabokov's personal and professional life.

If the themes of wandering exile and of the artist as a young man suggest Joyce, the resemblance is no accident. Dense, jittery, cacophonous, *The Gift* is a novel about artistic tradition and influence (which Nabokov purveys by way of parody and pastiche), and a work of high modernism, heavy with the shades of literary ancestors, whether Russian, Central European, or Hibernian.

It is also, despite its overlay of a self-protective and sometimes irritating irony and its adoption of experimental narrative tricks, an optimistic and frankly romantic book, and one which, with its wealth of past history, adventure (imaginary), and social texture, finally justifies its hero's description of it: "a good, thick old-fashioned novel."

Nabokov came early to artistic maturity. His European fiction of the Twenties and Thirties is masterly in its technical virtuosity and abuzz with the fertile invention, the love of the absurd, and the robust delight in things that make Nabokov so sweet and invigorating a writer, for all the frequent blackness of his subject matter. Indeed, to this reviewer's mind, these early Russian works exude a warmth and radiance that stand in refreshing contrast to his later fiction. But Nabokov's failings as a novelist are also apparent in these works. All his books are too long by a third: Nabokov never learned to use one word where seventy would do. As a consequence of this windiness, even the most Gothic and suspenseful of Nabokov's work suffers from a certain lack of narrative momentum which occasionally grinds to a halt the reader's willing lunge of excitement.

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Nabokov left Germany in 1937; by his account, because his father's fascist murderer had been released from prison. (He seems to have been curiously unaware of Nazism's larger consequences.) He moved to France, where he spent the next three years trying to determine whether a successful career was open to him in that country, either as a Russian novelist or as an adopted Frenchman. He decided not; the war clinched his decision. When Nabokov and his family fled Paris in May 1940, he had with him the manuscript of his first English novel and his English lecture notes for a summer-school course at Stanford. "Put another way," Andrew Field writes, "when Nabokov landed in America, his bags had been long and well packed with his English-language future." With the tenacity born of great ambition, Nabokov—who realized at once that no emigré life was possible in so large and demanding a continent—set about humorously and wholeheartedly becoming an American. (Field informs us, however, that the Russian language remained an ill-restrained vice to the novelist, who to his dying day battled the longing to go off the wagon and write one last Russian epic.)

Nabokov's first work published in the United States was his memoir, which appeared in installments in *The New Yorker* (1948-50). Three published variants of this same book exist: *Conclusive Evidence* (1951); a quite different Russian-language version, *Other Shores* (1954); and the definitively revised *Speak, Memory* (1966).[4]

This memoir presents the reader with considerable difficulties as either autobiography or fiction. To begin with, its literary manner is puffy and ponderous. Nabokov is one of those clever egotists who is sometimes very interesting and sometimes very boring, and doesn't care which—for, to his mind, anything about himself is of necessity both crucial to his audience and indescribably delicious. Consequently, *Speak, Memory* at times has the air of an insomniac's monologue, telling us to what degree centigrade Nabokov's temperature rose in various childhood illnesses, describing the jigsaw puzzles he played with as an infant and the Lyle's Golden Syrup he ate for breakfast, and cataloguing the various kinds of noses that graced the author's paternal family, his own—the aristocratic Korff nose—being "a handsome Germanic organ with a boldly boned bridge and a slightly tilted, distinctly grooved, fleshy end." A chapter on Nabokov's juvenilia informs us that one sycophantically glowing review of his first volume of verse (published at the age of seventeen) "cured me permanently of all interest in literary fame and was probably the cause of that almost pathological indifference to reviews which in later years deprived me of the emotions most authors are said to experience." (In fact, several of Nabokov's novels incorporate, verbatim, all the reviews of previous novels, while Field's *VN* relates how the writer continued to savage in his very last books critics who had reviewed his Berlin work unkindly fifty years before.) One section on Nabokov's gift of "audition colorée," the faculty of seeing a different color for every sound of the alphabet, suggestively reveals the memoir's determination to impress the reader at any cost with a sense of its hero's uniqueness. "The confessions of a synesthete," this discursion begins, "must sound tedious and pretentious to those who are protected from such leakings and drafts by more solid walls than mine are."

Yet, strangely enough, despite its narcissism, *Speak, Memory* merits Field's description of it as "an autobiography in which the purely personal is skirted and the emphasis placed upon peripheral places and people." One chapter of the book lists the life spans of great-great-aunts and -uncles (from the grand part of Nabokov's family; his mother's side, which was more plebeian, goes unchronicled). One chapter catalogues Nabokov's various tutors, another his governesses; one chapter describes Biarritz in the Teens, another the butterflies he collected as a child. In contrast to this, there

4 *Speak, Memory* was published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1966.

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are only three passing references to Nabokov's two sisters, while his two brothers are dispatched in a single aggressively dismissive page, most of it about how much more interesting and forceful Nabokov was than they. (Granted, Nabokov's near-twin Sergei gave him grief: a flamboyant homosexual who died in a Nazi concentration camp.) It is thus no surprise coming from *Speak, Memory* to hear the thwarted only-child Nabokov anxiously insisting to Andrew Field in *VN*, "You will never meet my sister Olga as long as I'm alive. No, darling. Here I put my foot down. No, darling. As I say, you will never meet her, because she's not a person to whom . . . Because it's a waste. It's—it's a *terrible* waste of time."

Nabokov's father, however, gets one chapter devoted to his accomplishments as politician, sportsman, paterfamilias, and, above all, man of honor—a chapter stiff with grief, admiration, and a sense of inadequacy. Field finds it "wooden and constrained"; I find its very woodenness moving, in contrast to Nabokov's customary facility. Nabokov's mother, whose spirit and intelligence gracefully infuse the book, is clearly her favorite son's accomplice, worshipper, and inspiration.

These "confessions of a synesthete" are clearly not autobiography in the conventional sense but rather an exercise in self-invention, in the trimming and rearrangement of a fitting past. (Such re-invention was a lifelong process: whereas in *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov claims descent from a fourteenth-century Tatar prince, in later years his progenitor resurfaces as Genghiz Khan.) Unfortunately, *Speak, Memory* never seeks to engage its audience, but relies instead upon the reader's being already so ardent, zestful, and obsessively attentive a lover of Nabokov that slack delivery and narrative longueurs will not dissuade him. Or, as one reviewer in *The New York Review of Books* put it (in a sentence some sly dummy included as a back-cover blurb): "This sensitive and graceful life, though in *Speak, Memory* recorded so sensitively and gracefully, is not invariably so fascinating to read about as it must have been to live." That Nabokov should have chosen thus to introduce himself to a huge and foreign audience is of an almost admirable audacity.

Nabokov's career in the United States was a fruitful and distinguished one. His work was published and kept in full display by the efforts of Edmund Wilson, who arranged appearances in *The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, The New Republic*, and other magazines. Nabokov enjoyed a voluminous correspondence with Wilson[5] and a falling-out over Nabokov's thousand-page translation and annotation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—a crabbed and eccentric work which ate up ten years' labor and drew mostly unfavorable response. Field devotes much attention in *VN* to Nabokov's prickly and quarrelsome friendship with Wilson, in which Nabokov alternately clowned and sulked, while Wilson drank and carped. Field tells us that in what was perhaps their final encounter, after the publication of *Lolita,* which Wilson hated, Nabokov accused Wilson reproachfully of not being a "Nabokov fan." Wilson said he didn't know what on earth Nabokov was talking about.

Nabokov's two decades in the United States were spent almost entirely at academic institutions, with a couple of breathers in Hollywood. He was for seven years a lecturer at Wellesley (1941-48), where he was censured at times (and possibly denied tenure) for his anti-Sovietism, which was considered by Wellesley's president to be a hindrance to the war effort. He taught for eleven years at Cornell (1948-59), an institution whose academic seriousness and intellectual freedom in those years Field feelingly conveys. In addition to holding these posts, Nabokov was a researcher at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge and a roaringly dramatic public performer who, like Charles Dickens before him, earned a good living making cross-country reading tours of the United States.

5 This correspondence was published as *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters,* edited by Simon Karlinsky (Harper & Row, 1979).

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His pit stops at small midwestern and southern colleges, combined with butterfly expeditions, coast-to-coast drives, and summers in the Rockies, in Utah, Arizona, and around Niagara Falls, gave Nabokov an intimate sense of the broad topography and moral climate of the United States. I would say that he loved America's freedom and bounty, and was both delighted and aesthetically exasperated by what he saw as their necessary manifestations—insipid beefsteak (*sic*!) and piped-in music. Thus, whereas Nabokov's Berlin and Paris novels luxuriate in exile and in a childhood Russia reconstituted by the exiled artistic imagination, Nabokov's American fiction plays upon the theme of a foreigner's clumsy, ironic, and rapturous love affair with this great, babyish, spanking-new siren America, and with the English language itself.

Of the works written on these shores, Nabokov's sweetest and most nimble piece of prose is *Pnin* (1953).[6] Set in Cornell (here appearing as Waindell College), *Pnin* delineates the passions (Russian grammar, American hardware, and a sluttish ex-wife) of Timofey Pnin, an emigré pedant who is ousted, thanks to collegiate intrigue, from his post as Russian teacher. *Pnin*'s plot is apparently simple, its narration artful indeed. (One critic has called the novel "as complicated as a pet snake.") Pnin's stumble from grace is narrated by an unidentified and rather condescending "friend" from the Old Country whom one discovers only in the novel's final debacle to be both the said ex-wife's seducer and the snazzy new Russian lecturer chosen to succeed the cashiered Pnin. (Though the novel ends sadly, Pnin resurfaces, promoted, in a later book, *Pale Fire*.)

In style *Pnin* displays an airiness and purity unlike anything else Nabokov wrote in English: its language is pointed and delicate. *Pnin* is also, out of a body of extremely funny novels, perhaps Nabokov's funniest. The author exploits to fullest comic satisfaction his hero's solemn linguistic gaffes and unsettling felicities and his blissful misadventures with cars, trains, and washing machines. Although Pnin is a misfit-hero after the type of *The Defense*'s Luzhin, he is endowed with a generosity, an intense joy in living, and a spirit of chivalry that make him, willy-nilly, a polite but quite serious crusader against all the author's own abominations. Thus, *Pnin* stands as a plea for individualism even at the risk of eccentricity, a trait that Nabokov subtly suggests perhaps goes sooner by the wayside in a university than in other sorts of communities. In a telling excursion, the outcast art teacher Lake is lauded for "his profound knowledge of innumerable techniques, his indifference to 'schools' and 'trends,' his detestation of quacks, his conviction . . . that nothing but individual talent mattered." As a painter, Lake professes the following credo: "That there is no such thing as the Ashcan School or the Cache Cache School or the Can Can School. That the work of art created with string, stamps, a Leftist newspaper, and the dropping of doves is based on a series of dreary platitudes . . . . That Dali is really Norman Rockwell's twin brother kidnaped by gypsies in babyhood." To such an individualist fired by a sense of artistic tradition, "What did it matter . . . that gentle chiaroscuro, offspring of veiled values and translucent undertones, had long since died behind the prison bars of abstract art, in the poorhouse of hideous primitivism?"

Pnin is a golden-tongued sentimental novel, both in the eighteenth-century and in the twentieth-century sense—a novel which gaily and lucidly fulfills its seemingly modest ambitions. Its prose is almost Roman in flavor, its periods so measured and precise as sometimes to have the quality of epitaph: thus, of Pnin as a teacher, "He was beloved not for any essential ability but for those unforgettable digressions of his, when he would remove his glasses to beam at the past while massaging the lenses of the present."

If *Pnin* may be seen as a rather sprightly autumnal, its immediate successor, *Lolita*

6 *Pnin* was published by Anchor/Doubleday in 1953.

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(1955),[7] the book which made Nabokov a household name, is the seamy, rampant, groveling, ecstatic, and frequently disgusting love song of a wordy pervert. *Lolita* is constructed after a nineteenth-century genre, with a foreword by a provincial pathologist explaining that the succeeding manuscript, circuitously entrusted to his care, is the confession of a murderer and madman who has died "in legal captivity." Thus begins the tale of Humbert Humbert, a Central European pedophile of sleek good looks and glib culture who marries a widow (soon killed off) in order to enjoy at leisure her twelve-year-old daughter Lolita. The novel, geographically arranged, charts Humbert Humbert and Lolita's four-year drive, from motel to motel across a wide, fly-by-night America, Lolita bribed with candy and movie magazines, trying to avoid Humbert's increasingly frantic attentions, while he hallucinates about detectives in pursuit. In the end, Lolita escapes her captor in Elphinstone, California; Humbert Humbert murders the man he imagines to have abducted her. Its finale once again conforms to a nineteenth-century genre: Lolita at seventeen, married to a mechanic on the Alaskan frontier, dies in poverty and childbirth; Humbert dies in prison.

As everyone knows, *Lolita* enjoyed a tremendous *succès du scandale.* Although, as Nabokov is quick to point out, the novel's language is, technically, pure—that is, no four-letter words: the author preferred forty-letter ones—its depiction of rape, pedophilia, and near-incest branded it a work of pornography. It is. (In one electrifying passage of his biography, Field informs us that Adolf Eichmann read *Lolita* in prison in Jerusalem and declared, "Das ist aber ein sehr unerfreuliches Buch." ["That is quite an offensive book."] Just because Eichmann said it doesn't mean it's not so.)

Lolita was banned in some countries, was brought out in an Olympia Press edition in Paris which sold like hotcakes, and eventually earned its author half a million dollars in sales and movie rights and early retirement to Switzerland. A colleague at Cornell remarked to Nabokov that people generally looked askance at a man who lived off a little girl's earnings. Nabokov was not amused.

Of Nabokov's books, *Lolita* is the most critically dissected and mauled. There have been articles written on *Lolita* as a catalogue of butterflies, *Lolita* as a game of chess, *Lolita* as a reworking of Proust's *Albertine disparue,* as a parody of the life and work of Edgar Allan Poe or of *Eugene Onegin.* More germanely, many critics have read the novel as an allegory of Europe and America, or of Nabokov's romance with the English language. None of these flights of critical fancy is unwarranted: *Lolita* is indeed caked with anagrams, puns, pastiches, and allusions, all pointing to the authors, works, and sports listed above, and many more. It is also travelogue gone haywire, reeling off a vertiginous succession of mountains, gorges, caves, and forests. (I think this has more to do with the novel's having been composed on the road, in the motels of Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, and Oregon, than with any deeper allegorical thrust.)

Such criticism, however, serves (unintentionally?) to suggest that *Lolita* is not "about" what it clearly is about: a middle-aged man's prolonged violation of his young stepdaughter (Humbert Humbert is a mere thirty-eight when they meet). As Field's biography usefully reminds us, pedophilia and rape were indeed abiding literary obsessions of Nabokov's: he delineated a *Lolita*-like plot in *The Gift* and wrote up the story in Parisian garb in at least two versions, one of which, "The Enchanter," has been posthumously published.[8] Nabokov in his afterword to *Lolita* claims that he was inspired by a 1939 French news story about a chimpanzee who was taught to draw and sketched the bars of his cage. Field, who rightly makes much of the prison theme in *Lolita,* finds no evidence of such an experiment or such a story, but

7 *Lolita* was published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1955, but the book was not released until 1958.

8 *The Enchanter* was published in book form by Putnam in 1986.

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traces the novel's origins instead to Nabokov's habitual reading of Havelock Ellis, in whose chronicles of sexual pathology there appear the confessions of an aristocratic Russian-Ukrainian pedophile.

One of the more perceptive readings of the book is by Lionel Trilling. Trilling's essay, "The Last Lover,"[9] makes two main points: that Nabokov's treatment of this "taboo" subject should be shocking but is not; and, concomitantly, that *Lolita* is not a pornographic work, but a novel about love. Convincingly, Trilling argues that, furthermore, *Lolita* rings a change on the kind of courtly passion-love that found its highest expression in Arthurian romance: a man's unrequited, impossible, and deathless love for an unattainable woman. Thus, Humbert finds to his despair that the more often he possesses Lolita, the less he has of her, the more he desires her, and the more he bores and exasperates her—until, finally, when Lolita is a faded seventeen-year-old housewife, looks gone, and very pregnant, Humbert's love for her reaches its apogee. Trilling quotes:

> . . . There she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!) hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D.—and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricket in the crisp reeds . . . but thank God it was not that echo alone that I worshiped. What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand pêché radieux,* had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I canceled and cursed. You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond . . . ."

Trilling is right about the nature of the love the novel expresses, but in his desire to rebuke the philistinism of those contemporaries who considered *Lolita* obscene, he is uncharacteristically betrayed into another kind of obtuseness. (Incidentally, Trilling breaks off the quoted passage where he does because it goes on to be too salacious to be printed in a serious magazine, even today.) For *Lolita is* a shocking book, and, I believe, is meant to be. Indeed, the novel is thinned of its intended resonance if we do not see Humbert's violation as he himself finally comes to see it: as a bestial and infernal crime against nature. (Trilling feels that possibly this recognition is only ironic.) The horror of *Lolita* is not that Humbert Humbert has broken a "taboo"—one which a more enlightened and less hypocritical society might lift—but rather, as Humbert himself insists, that he has held a young child prisoner for four years, and by rape, threats, and bribery extinguished in her any healthy life-appetite. Or, as Humbert himself puts it, he robbed Lolita of her childhood, he ruined her life. The Lolita whom we meet at twelve is a deliciously raucous and ribald tomboy; Lolita at seventeen is worn out, and soon dead. Humbert tells us he went to sleep every night to the sounds of the child sobbing. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? With that bitter acuity of perception that makes him not only a madman but also the most psychologically acute of modern narrators, Humbert Humbert sets forth every shade of Lolita's reaction to his "love": boredom, disgust, resignation, fury, the walking narcolepsy that masks an unendurable discomfort, along with the hopelessness of being a child, an orphan, and having

9 "The Last Lover" was published in *Encounter* in October, 1958, and reprinted in *Speaking of Literature and Society* (edited by Diana Trilling; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

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nowhere else to go. Any critique of the novel's exquisite sensuality thus must also take into account the foundation of that sensuality in one man's willed warping and deadening of another's soul.

It is strange but undeniable that, for all its vicious nihilism, *Lolita*'s love is finally a transcendent love. Stranger still is that in depicting it, Nabokov momentarily transcends his own limits as a novelist. Lolita and Humbert are real—if not human quite, then emblems: as real as Dido and Aeneas. We know them, just as, to their eternal undoing, they know each other. Humbert's concluding justification is the justification of art: that he must exist "at least a couple of months longer, so as to have [me] make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita." Whether or not one accepts such a self-justification, one must say of this novel, with *The Good Soldier*'s narrator, "This is the saddest story I have ever heard." It is tormentingly beautiful and profoundly repulsive.

Where *Lolita* is agitated and ornate, the poem that stands at the heart of *Pale Fire,*[10] Nabokov's next and perhaps his best novel, is, in Andrew Field's words, "glacially serene." *Pale Fire,* Field tells us, was written in France and Switzerland, but is located at Cornell. The novel's form is dichotomous, consisting of the poem "Pale Fire," 999 lines in length, and a one-hundred-fifty-page commentary on it by one Charles Kinbote. The poem, ostensibly composed by the late John Shade, a famous New England poet living with his wife of forty years in a small Appalachian college town, is Augustan in its rhyming couplets, its tone of gentle, self-mocking equanimity, and its celebration of the ordinary. Its theme is the spiritual autobiography of the poet: overweight, fiftyish, reluctantly on the wagon, and still very much in love with his wife. (It should be noted here that Nabokov, funnily enough, is one of the modern novel's great portrayers of connubial love, from his earliest works to his last.) This autobiography is situated in what one might call the crossroads of the humdrum and the apocalyptic. It describes Shade's lonesome childhood (in the house in which he still lives); his brushes with God, Aunt Mabel, atheism, and the cosmos; his clumsy wooing of his Sybil; his book on Alexander Pope and his study of after-death experiences; and the life and suicide of the Shades' young daughter Hazel.

"Pale Fire" is a gorgeous piece of verse. Its form, the heroic couplet, which Pope and Swift brought to a pithy apotheosis, is an ambitious choice for moderns (it easily falls into bombast or doggerel) but one which Nabokov beautifully fulfills. Pope, who is frequently cited in this poem, packed his lines to bursting and went for end-stopped couplets; Nabokov prefers enjambment (run-on sentences), perhaps for its effect of greater oddity, complexity, and colloquialism—a choice, however, which, in contrast to his eighteenth-century models, occasionally makes his verse sound as loose as a sack of potatoes. Such quibbles aside, "Pale Fire" is handsomely made and profoundly expressive, both in its metaphysical grapplings and in its homely-romantic evocation of small-town academic life and of a thoroughly American domesticity. Shade thus describes the mystical swoons that periodically assail him:

> And then black night. That blackness was
> sublime.
> I felt distributed through space and time:
> One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
> Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
> One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
> In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.
> There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green
> Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,
> An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,
> And all tomorrows in my funnybone.

Had "Pale Fire" been printed on its own, Nabokov might have been deemed an important modern American poet. As it is,

10 *Pale Fire* was published by Putnam in 1962.

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accompanying this poem, which Nabokov claims to have been the hardest thing he ever wrote, is the Commentary of Kinbote, a colleague of Shade's who either is, or imagines himself to be, the fugitive King of Zembla and who has purloined the now-dead poet's manuscript under the belief that it is actually a verse-history of Zembla and of Kinbote's own escape to the West during its Extremist (read Communist) revolution. In this Commentary, which apes (among other sources) Pope's mock-annotations to *The Dunciad* in the person of the pedant-manqué Martinus Scriblerus, Kinbote veers from a maniacally intense analysis of his neighborly encounters with his idol John Shade to his interlinear history of Zembla and the story of his disguised flight and pursuit of a hired gun who eventually murders Shade by mistake.

Pale Fire, poem and critical apparatus combined, thus represents something of a mystery, in which the reader must discover not only whodunit but who invented whom. Is the famous poet Shade a figment of the lunatic Kinbote's imagination? Is Kinbote Shade's joke? Is Charles Kinbote King Charles Xavier Vseslav the Beloved? Is John Shade's killer Jakob Gradus, the Latvian-born Extremist whose terrorist trip to the West Kinbote charts, or is he, as the police aver, Jack Grey, an escapee from the local Institute for the Criminally Insane?

In addition to such fundamental riddles, which cast an irresoluble doubt on the identity or even the existence of the chief protagonists, the text of *Pale Fire* is a nest of intricate trilingual puns, cryptograms, and significant "misprints," in which each character in the poem has his mirror-image in the Commentary. For instance, the green-jacketed French professor Gerald Emerald is the secret twin of the Zemblan Izumdrov, whose name is Russian for "emerald"; Kinbote maintains that the name in fact is Zemblan for "from the Umruds" (an Eskimo tribe), a phrase that in any case, in Russian, critics inform us, would still be "iz umrudov." Similarly, the good Zemblan Baron Radomir Mandevil has a wicked anagrammatic cousin Baron Mirador Mandevil: a family name which plays on the human and diabolical, on the fourteenth-century imaginary-travels writer Sir John Mandeville, and on a seventeenth-century fabulist of the bees with the same surname.

Such jests, which are simplicity itself for authors to make and trickier for readers to decipher, give one a good sense of why Nabokov's novels have become a cottage industry for academics. Nabokov scholars, to whom his multiple and poly-lingual word play is bread and butter, do their professional best to assure the ordinary reader that he cannot hope to appreciate their man if he doesn't realize that Canto 4 of *Pale Fire* read backwards in a heavy Norwegian accent yields a parody of the nineteenth-century Russian poet Kirill Kropolov's "Ode to a Lupin." Needless to say, if one can only understand or enjoy Nabokov's work on such terms, then he is not a good novelist but rather a talented maker of double acrostics.

The critic Mary McCarthy, perhaps in penitence for having trashed *Lolita* in a letter to Edmund Wilson that was sent on to Nabokov, went farthest in chasing word play in *Pale Fire,* which she judged in a 1962 review in *The New Republic* not only "one of the very great works of art of this century" but also "a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit . . . ."[11]

Though she intended a compliment, McCarthy does the novel something of an injustice, for the above-listed qualities are precisely those which make Nabokov's work at its most excessive an arid display of mere cleverness. It is *Pale Fire*'s success, however, that it brings satisfaction as a fine piece of verse comically annotated even to a reader unfamiliar with its allusions or uninterested in pursuing its puns.

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11 "A Bolt from the Blue," by Mary McCarthy; *The New Republic,* June 4, 1962. The article was reprinted in *The Writing on the Wall,* published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1970.

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Andrew Field's *VN* is quite scathing in its depiction of Nabokov's last years in Montreux, in which the novelist became increasingly petty and posturing in his newly grown celebrity. He began to drink heavily (behind his wife's back). In television interviews, he poured Scotch from a teapot, called other writers "total pederasts," and campaigned for the Nobel Prize, which, reprehensibly, he never got; the campaign consisted of his going down the list of previous recipients and ridiculing their mediocrity. In addition, he threatened expensive lawsuits over criticism he didn't like and, according to Field, "added sexual embellishments to nearly all the republications and new translations of the old Sirin novels." He also produced a revised version of his translation and commentary on *Eugene Onegin,* an enterprise justly characterized by the historian Alexander Gerschenkron as "a great effort . . . sadly distorted by the desire to be original at all cost, by confused theorizing, by promises that never could be redeemed, by spiteful pedantry, unbridled emotions, and last but not least, unrestrained egotism."

Nabokov's commentary on *Onegin* is also a useful compendium of his opinions on literature. To list just a few of Gerschenkron's citations: "Insipid Virgil and his pale pederasts"; "Corneille's bombastic and platitudinous *Cid*"; the "triviality" of Goethe's *Faust*; Stendhal's "paltry literary style" and "much overrated *Le rouge et le noir*"; "the famous, but talentless Belinski"; "the well-meaning, but *talentlos* August Wilhelm Schlegel"; Dostoevsky, "a much overrated, sentimental novelist"; and finally, "all the plaster idols of academic tradition from Cervantes to George Eliot (not to speak of the crumbling Manns and Faulkners of our time)." Field in *VN* also quotes Nabokov's discovery "that *War and Peace* is really a very childish piece of writing."

Nabokov's critique of works he admires is hardly more adept. His approach to *Onegin* itself consists of plotting the probable latitude and longitude of unspecified country seats in the poem, and informing us that although the heroine's Saint's Day, January 12, fell on a Wednesday in 1821, Pushkin incomprehensibly makes it a Saturday, and although the poet has her speaking to the Spanish Ambassador to St. Petersburg in 1824, in that year Spain in fact had no ambassador at the Russian court. In *Pale Fire* and elsewhere, Nabokov characterizes another favorite book, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdus,* as—in Field's words—"a covert glorification of homosexual love" with its heroine merely a chauffeur in skirts: a judgment which in its slyly reductive malignity is equivalent to deeming Beethoven's work a justification of deafness. Between Nabokov admiring and Nabokov smearing it is hard to choose, although as Alexander Pope wrote of the praise of rabid reviewers, "It is the slaver kills, and not the Bite."

Sadly, the combination of posturing and pedantry that characterizes Nabokov's scholarly criticism prevents one from taking him seriously as a critic. After his death, his university addresses were collected and published in two volumes, *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature.*[12] Although impressive in their thoroughness, these lectures betray no critical aptitude save enthusiasm, but rather confirm one's sense of the critic Nabokov as a harmlessly vicious detractor and a pedantic friend.

In Switzerland, Nabokov wrote three last novels, none of them good: *Ada* (1969), *Transparent Things* (1973), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1975). *Ada* is the most ambitious and the most (to borrow a favorite adjective of its author's) overrated of these works.[13] Field notes that critics who had overlooked *Lolita* and *Pale Fire,* not to mention Nabokov's newly translated Russian novels, lauded this latest offering (for which Nabokov received a million-dollar contract) by a man suddenly acknowledged to be the world's greatest living writer. "There was not going to be any mistake in failing to recognize Nabokov's greatness again."

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12 *Lectures on Russian Literature* was published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1981.

13 *Ada* was published by McGraw-Hill in 1969.

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The six-hundred-page effusion of a seventy-year-old author, *Ada* is set in a fantasy blend of Russia and America (Amerussia) on a planet called Antiterra which combines features of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The book, whose full title is *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle,* depicts the love affair between Van Veen (a pun on the author's initials), an overeducated rake, and his half-sister Ada. This affair, which begins in the garden of their prelapsarian country estate when Ada is twelve and Van fourteen, continues until both protagonists—who are collaborating on this "memoir"—are in their late nineties. Their duet is complicated by a third party, Ada's kid sister Lucette, whom Ada periodically ravishes and who, from unrequited lust for Van, finally throws herself off an ocean-liner.

Ada is at best an uneven book. Its hammy sensationalism—together with its array of meticulously and floridly detailed sexual orgies—makes the novel at times as riveting as only truly pulp fiction can be. Yet *Ada* is far too static and too long-winded to qualify as a Gothic bodice-ripper. Field quotes one reader's remark that Ada and Veen and Lucette are not human characters at all, but dolphins. The truth is even worse than that: they are dolphins who read Proust at the age of seven, and like to tell you all about it—in French.

More than almost any other Nabokov novel, however, *Ada* is also a critic's happy hunting ground. Robert Alter has written what is justly regarded as the seminal essay on the book in *Commentary* (August, 1969) —an essay which charts *Ada*'s recapitulation of Andrew Marvell's poem "The Garden," as well as its parodic encapsulation of the history of romanticism and the novel, especially Chateaubriand's *René.* (The book, which is written in three languages plus an imaginary Canadian-like French dialect, also is a honeycomb of Russian literary allusions and pastiches.) Yet despite its frantic exuberance and its often shimmering use of color and pattern, *Ada* is an empty and infantile piece of work, too narcissistic ever successfully to communicate its charm to the reader. Although it is not a kind example of Nabokov's fiction, the book points to several related flaws which are present in even his best works and which threaten his entire enterprise.

Ada is a novel not about life or human nature or (like Marvell's "The Garden") about man's relation to God, but a novel solely about art. Its recurrent message is the final message of all Nabokov's most characteristic work: that only through art's artifice can one escape the ravages of time and gain immortality. This is no profound or innovative thought: it runs, for instance, through Shakespeare's sonnets, but then Shakespeare also wrote plays that were about life and human nature. On the contrary, self-consciously pursued, the idea is a rather effete one. At such an extreme, Nabokov's undiluted and self-subsistent aestheticism reaches for an art without flesh and blood, without human character and society, for an immortality without God. Its conclusion is the cloying and tinny paradise of *Ada,* in which only incestuous, even hermaphroditic lovers can breathe.

Nabokov has been justly commended for his vivid, ingenious, and frequently outlandish use of language. Yet this gift too he sometimes takes to an aesthetic extreme at which sound and syllable become divorced from meaning: hence, his lifelong preoccupation with "audition colorée." A writer whose chief pleasure resides in the anagram—that is, in the mechanical rearrangement of letters from one tongue into the sometimes-mangled approximation of another—is surely no longer a lover of language (which implies a love of what language expresses), but merely a lover of syllables or alphabets. Thus, Nabokov's prose at its most ostentatious and preciously nit-picking recalls Pope's summation of a newly minted baron's palace:

> Lo, what huge heaps of littleness around!
> The whole, a labor'd Quarry above ground.

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Luckily, although such tendencies are always present, Nabokov is not often at his worst. On the contrary, he has left us in two languages half a dozen celestially pure and lucid, energetic, and imaginative novels and some first-rate poetry.

Where, however, does Nabokov belong in the night-sky of poets and novelists? He is not a novelist of ideas—indeed, he despised the novel of ideas—nor, despite his periodic discursions on time and space, is he a particularly intellectual or philosophical writer. Although Nabokov's work is larded with his conservative political beliefs (which remained remarkably consistent from earliest youth to old age), this conservatism—made up principally of an antipathy to Communism and its apologists; to Freud and psychoanalysis; to bullfights, primitivism, and abstract art ("Music in supermarkets, swimming-pools," *Pale Fire* adds)—is in flavor more aesthetic than ideological and is inevitably expressed with a frivolous intemperance which urges the reader not to take it too seriously.

But if he is not a novelist of ideas, Nabokov is nonetheless recognizably a high modernist. In his confounding of narrative expectations, his tricky allusiveness and lexical play, his violent and mannered conflation of genres, his resounding sense of literary tradition, his love of the absurd, his insistence upon originality at any price, and, above all, his worship of art and the artist, Nabokov continually and deliberately looks back to such earlier twentieth-century masters as Joyce, Kafka, and Andrei Bely.

It is true that, even at its best (*The Gift, Lolita, Pale Fire*), Nabokov's work is simply not of the caliber of these writers, whose novels offer a profundity of thought and feeling, a breadth of comprehension, and, finally, a transcendence which make Nabokov's by contrast seem brittle and contrived. But the consolation prize is that Nabokov runs a distinguished second, and that the peculiar virtues of his best novels—psychological intensity, antic language, vivid characters, luscious imagery, robust wit, and, most important, the ability (when he chooses) to sadden, thrill, disgust, frighten, and amuse his readers hugely—will long remain fiction's most precious ammunition and necessary stay. Although I suspect that Nabokov's work is too quirky and foreign, too marginal to the national enterprise, ever to hold a central place in the canon of American literature, he is nonetheless one of our very best writers.

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The Orsay experience

by James Lord

Parisian pride is prodigious. Lately, however, while New York has been gloating over its apparent conquest of cultural, political, and economic hegemony in the Western world, the French capital has seemed spiritually, intellectually, creatively to have fallen onto rather despondent times. Something indeed prodigious has clearly been needed to do the city proud once again as a center of civilization second to none. A rudimentary attempt to satisfy this need brought into being a decade ago the Georges Pompidou National Center for Art and Culture, the riposte of Paris to New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was hideous and pretentious, a fiasco. The Pompidou Center is a public toy like the Eiffel Tower, not a select abode for art. What was wanted instead was something audacious but sure, something nobody else could achieve but everybody in the world must want to see, something superlative but simple, miraculously imaginative but serenely self-evident and nicely controversial though not overtly contentious. It would have to embody a vision, crystallize an idea, and vindicate an ideal. What it could do for Paris, therefore, would have to be just that little bit better than everything which Paris, even in all its glory, could do for it. What was wanted was a prodigy, in short, prodigiously Parisian. The Musée d'Orsay is it.

The International Exposition of 1900 took place in the City of Light. Celebrating the conclusive victory and plutocracy of the Industrial Revolution, while giving rather short shrift to concomitant political disturbances, including the Affair, this ostentatious occasion also looked forward with a certain complacency to the oncoming century, which was expected to better mankind in every way, answering his dreams as well as his prayers. Not only national but also municipal pride was amply gratified when on Bastille Day of that crucial year a monumental, modern railway station was inaugurated with pomp in the very heart of the capital, on the Left Bank of the Seine, facing the Louvre, the Tuileries Garden and Place de la Concorde, a site, indeed, than which none more proud is to be found on earth. Designed by a Beaux-Arts architect in the style and spirit of the times, the Gare d'Orsay was conceived at once as an industrial temple and factory of travel, its raison d'être to accommodate large crowds of people who knew where they wanted to go and were in a hurry to get there.

Symbol of progress, the Orsay Station became its victim less than half a century after opening its doors: the platforms had been built too short to receive electric trains of considerably increased length. The huge terminal, with its vast barrel vault of glass and iron, and the adjacent hotel, with its ornate public rooms and labyrinthine corridors, fell into disrepair, its façade blackened by pollution and the interior looming unlit like a dungeon from the hand of Piranesi. No wonder Orson Welles chose this setting

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to film his version of *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. The edifice seemed as doomed as the protagonist. There was talk of demolition, of a grand, brand new hotel to house an influx of tourists ever more countless coming from all corners of the world. Never for an instant, of course, did it occur to anyone to give over this enormous space to an institution of public welfare, a hospital, say, or, even worse, a school. Tourists don't line up to visit such unprestigious places or spend much money in the shops and restaurants nearby. Paris's increasingly innumerable visitors, however, are drawn to the city solely by the splendors and beauties of its past, not by any really contemporary, structurally tangible expression of the French spirit. To those responsible for the conservation and glorification of this spirit what, then, could have seemed more natural, more imperative than to contrive some means of bringing the past palpably up-to-date, making it as immediate and timely as the day after tomorrow? If a moribund railway station could be pressed into use for this purpose, all to the good. So, indeed, went the thinking of persons in authority as they eyed the obsolescent hulk just across the river from the world's greatest museum. That institution itself, moreover, had fallen rather behind the times, unable adequately to cope with the flood tide of tourists and suffering from severe shortages of space, especially in the galleries devoted to the display of works from the second half of the nineteenth century. Quite as a sacramental revelation, consequently, as if begotten by itself, evolved the idea that an unoccupied industrial temple could attain epoch-making transubstantiation by becoming a crowded cathedral of art. And lo, it has come to pass.

Committees sat, curators pondered, architects drew plans, and everybody agreed that the new museum would best go into business by devoting itself entirely to the period when French art was at its apex, the period, incidentally, when Paris was the uncontested, proudest art center of the Western world and the period most prodigiously represented already in the national and municipal collections. Lest anyone suspect, moreover, that the best interests of business were a trifling aspect of the picture, it will be well to point out that this very period produced the works of art which attract by far the largest crowds of paying visitors to museums. As "blockbuster" stock-in-trade only the *Mona Lisa* herself, now nearly invisible inside a bulletproof bunker, can ring up more impressive tourist revenue than the Impressionists.

From the beginning the Orsay planners foresaw that their museum must have definite boundaries in time but be as comprehensive as possible in its cultural and aesthetic reach. The present-day passion for creating ever more museums is a phenomenon far too complex to delve into here, but it may seem relevant in passing to recall Jean Cocteau's clever remark to the effect that this contemporary craving to build and visit new houses for civilization's artifacts is akin to the final, all-embracing vision of a lifetime that is supposed to be experienced by persons drowning as they go down for the last time. Political considerations naturally came into the planning of the Musée d'Orsay, as they come into all endeavors aimed at imposing a coherent semblance of order upon the inherent confusion and tumult of human circumstances, and the museum's creators shrewdly selected temporal boundaries with a big political bang: 1848 on the left, as it were, and 1914 on the right, with 1870-71 as a radical Parisian barricade in between.

This symbolic scission between right and left certainly played a real part in the formulation of policy as regards the design, direction, and installation of the new museum within the shell of the obsolete railroad terminal, and it is clearly reflected in the manner whereby visitors are directed and expected to undergo "The Orsay Experience." Delight is definitely not the primary objective of this institution. It aims to instruct. And it seems superbly careless of whether or not three million people per year—the tourist tidal wave counted upon to overrun the Left Bank annually—may pos-

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sess the least aptitude for learning. The lesson exists. To take it in, admittedly, no individual of average discrimination and acumen could ever be up to the mark. Ten to twenty thousand visitors each day will be admitted to seventeen thousand square meters of exhibition space wherein four thousand objects of art compete, often aggressively, for attention. Aesthetic confrontation on this scale requires discernment of a universal order. Why, one is tempted to say that even Goethe, the last universal man, might have been daunted by such a challenge to his perceptions. And who else do we find waiting for us at the very entrance to the Musée d'Orsay? Yes, it's the Sage of Weimar himself, though larger than life, of course, and fittingly a bit outside the museum's time boundary, portrayed in plaster by David d'Angers, frowning and cerebal, aged eighty. Universal genius notwithstanding, the author of *Faust* would have been stunned to contemplate the heteroclite vision of museological ontology which his effigy has been set up to countenance. Never mind that he would have quite disliked seeing the handiwork of a decidedly inferior artist displayed to such effect.

The first thing about the old railroad station to concern its new custodians was the preservation of the extant exterior. A massive but passive example of the post-Napoleon III monumental meringue style, its ugliness had stood the test of time, and saving it had become a point of Parisian pride. To redesign and reconstruct the interior the architect selected to be principally responsible, and to receive major credit or blame, was an Italian named Gae Aulenti, a woman with a vision all her own and for whom architecture has no business being flexible or temporary. Partial to stone, and plenty of it, she has put together an ingenious, orderly, and impressive series of interlocking galleries, some small and warm, some lofty and grand, others narrow and/or oddly angular, all opening off the soaring central nave except for those on the top floor, which contain the most dazzling concentration of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masterpieces. No nation more relishes finding fault than the French, so it was to be expected that Signora Aulenti's designs would win her a cornucopia of brickbats. Some critics say the architect's inspiration appears to have come from the heyday of Il Duce, others say from Karnak or the Baths of Diocletian; others want wood and fabric in place of stone and plaster, still others would have liked an interior mirroring the exterior; and there are many in addition who bitterly regret the good old dusty, drab days of the Jeu de Paume, where all the best pictures previously hung and where, to be sure, thirty-five years ago it was even possible to look at them in ardent tranquility. Those days are gone forever. Gae Aulenti recognized this reality and made her plans accordingly.

The Musée d'Orsay, therefore, may not be the ideal place to go in order to carry on a love affair with art, as the caress of eyesight craves privacy no less than the caresses of fingertips. And yet the masterpieces are tantalizingly present, only waiting to yield bounties of bliss. To my eye, I must say, the consummation is still ecstatically possible. But I am something of an exception, not to say an aberration, because my lifelong passion for painting and sculpture has put me in a position of privilege vis-à-vis gratification. That is to say, I can get in to enjoy it when the crowds can't, and it is only right to assert at once that I am a fanatic advocate of such privilege. Thus, wandering alone at leisure along the itinerary planned by Signora Aulenti, I find the material and spatial arrangements quite sufficiently impressive but not in the least offensive, allowing the works of art to take due precedence over the premises, as they should. The one who would further a love affair had best be modest and self-effacing. Compelled to contend with the likes of Courbet, Manet, Degas, Gauguin, and Cézanne, none of whom was oppressed by bashfulness, Orsay's architect seems to me to have done a highly creditable job. It may even be that, unlike, for instance, Frank Lloyd Wright, she feels an authentic affinity for works of art, since it is they, after all, not their showcase, that can arouse passion.

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The concept at the heart of the Orsay lesson is history, and not by any means merely art history; it is historical history embodied in a huge conglomeration of objects assembled to depict the creative story of a specific period. Everything and everyone, from Alma-Tadema to Ziem, it seems, has been gotten together to serve the didactic purpose. The curators who selected and installed this plethora of clues to the conundrum of culture were principally two: Michel Laclotte, a Louvre veteran and specialist in French primitive painting, and Françoise Cachin, a dynamic, articulate exponent of nouveau musée dialectic, who has now been named director of the new institution. Out of three million yearly visitors maybe three thousand will come prepared to engage in the depth and diversity of looking needed for fit appreciation of the Musée d'Orsay. Does that seem too desperate an estimate? Then make it one in a hundred rather than one in a thousand, although when art's at stake hyperbole can't hurt. And I'm not at all sure that my own appreciation would be deemed adequate. I already know everything I can hope to know about the cultural aspects of the Dreyfus Affair, the plight of agricultural laborers, fashions for the seashore, farmyard and factory conditions, Paris under the Commune, Second Empire finery, the advent of the telephone, not to mention the phonograph and the subway, and much more, including falconry and jewelry. I only want to fall in love. And despite its didactic imperative the Musée d'Orsay is prepared to let you do that if you can just get in alone. Privacy generates perspicuity. When three's a crowd, think about three million. That's big business. And Orsay, having a mind all its own, is ready to go into it with computer terminals, electronic archives, and audio-visual equipment galore. You want to ask Van Gogh about his ear, Monet about his eyesight, or Courbet about his paranoia, just touch the appropriate buttons and—presto!—the relevant information and images will appear upon a screen with state-of-the-art precision, so to speak. The great idea of the Musée d'Orsay is that you can go in knowing nothing about anything that happened, especially in France, between 1848 and 1914 and come out knowing, if not quite everything, then enough of everything to converse unembarrassed with Goethe. The museum's ideal is to do Paris proud not only as the place where all this *is* possible but also as the very place which *made* it possible. Paris restored to contemporary grandeur by past Parisian grandeur. A prodigy, indeed, of pride. The tourists will surely come in droves.

Having survived Goethe's omniscient gaze, let's try to take some measure of the cathedral. Four hundred fifty feet in length, an even hundred in height, awash with natural light beneath the spectacular vault, the central space, with side galleries opening from it both right and left like chapels, definitely evokes a devotional structure. Art as godhead. The icons set up in the nave are all works of sculpture and they perfectly characterize the dominant spirit of the period as one of arid secular mediocrity. The inert procession of creations by Pradier, Bloch, Schoenewerk, Falguière, Carrier-Belleuse, Moulin, et al. culminates in a superabundant collection of Carpeaux which plainly represents a futile effort to elevate him high above the banality and frivolity of his period. In the chapel-galleries to the right are appropriately housed conventional, academic paintings, starting with the wishy-washy *Source* by Ingres, hideous stuff by Gérôme, Cabanel, Bouguereau, and Fromentin, and even surprisingly poor work by Chassériau, who could be good when challenged by good subjects. It is fun to let one's eyes frisk amidst all this bad art, knowing, moreover, there is worse to come, because discernment gets whetted by the need for discrimination. Puvis de Chavannes contrived to develop a style all his own, but it tried so hard to be monumental and spiritual that it turned out to be fundamentally vacuous and shabby. As for Gustave Moreau, whose well-deserved fate is to have become chic, which he would have hated, his unctuous versions of mythological subjects glisten with facility but are

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as lifeless as a slab of agate. Then we come upon the work of Degas done before 1870. What mastery! What daring! Here is a genius, a bit cold-blooded, perhaps, maybe rather misanthropic, but clearly capable at age twenty-five of producing masterpieces. We shall see more of him and acknowledge that he would probably have approved the inclusion of his debut on the side of the conservatives. After which there is a great lot of Napoleon III furniture, porcelain, glass, silver, and assorted decorative junk, all of it supremely ugly and quite a delight in the genre of all-time Camp. There has been some maneuvering in historical circles lately to bring off a rehabilitation of the second Bonaparte emperor, and therefore it's good and timely to have this occasion to see yet again how utterly shallow, vainglorious, and vulgar was the official taste of his reign.

On the left, to start with we encounter Daumier, a shrewd choice, highly original, artistically and politically radical, ever on the side of the neglected and oppressed though himself a strangely marginal figure both as a man and artist despite great popularity. His major achievements were his lithographs, a small selection of which is shown here. As a painter and sculptor Daumier is good but not great; we leave his gallery without elation. The Barbizon School comes next, Millet, Rousseau, Diaz, Daubigny, plus a few leafy landscapes by Corot, all perfectly pleasing, honest, sensible, and just a bit dull. The spirit soars and the eye is thrilled when we come upon the work of Manet done before 1870, masterpieces like *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*, works with such brilliant but brash reference to Renaissance inspiration that one can only suppose the critics who damned them knew nothing of Raphael, let alone Titian. How pleasing it is to see this audacious, sweet-tempered innovator set in a chronological context which demonstrates both his daring and the effect upon his most gifted contemporaries, who were his friends. For Claude Monet is the next incomparably talented painter whose stellar trajectory is visible within the Musée d'Orsay. Monet, as a matter of fact, is the figure who looms largest and most imposingly throughout the whole museum, as the range of his work on display covers exactly half a century and is represented by some seventy canvases, a veritable Monet retrospective in itself. One recalls, of course, the trenchant summation of Cézanne: "Monet is only an eye. But what an eye!" It's true. The supremacy of pure looking is rendered by Monet as by none other, and one observes with wonder the sheer delight of his visual experiences and the uncanny sureness of hand by which he was able to represent them. This is genius in its most spontaneous and felicitous form: seeing has become equivalent to being, whereby is imparted bliss. Monet's comrade Bazille, not yet thirty when killed in the war of 1870, makes a brief, brilliant appearance. Then Renoir, supremely talented from the beginning, meets our eye, and the importance of Paris as an essential element of the creative ferment begins to pervade one's perception both of the museum and its contents.

Some backtracking in the itinerary takes us backward aesthetically, too, to glance in passing at dull but often skilled works by Jules Breton, Troyon, Rosa Bonheur, and Monticelli, with the sudden surprise of a radiant, breathtaking landscape by an unknown painter named Chintreuil. A huge gallery facing the Seine is devoted entirely to Courbet, both the *Studio* and *Funeral* being present, plus seascapes, stags battling, and a fine self-portrait. The contradictory, controversial aspects of Courbet's career and oeuvre are here assimilated into visible evidence that his influence was absolutely decisive for the great painters who came after him, and that his achievement, if not as seductive or sublime as some, is nonetheless of the first order. The two well-known group portraits of noted artists and authors by Fantin-Latour are here, and it is high time to say how self-conscious and aesthetically uninteresting they are, albeit proud illustrations of Parisian pre-eminence. Fortunately Fantin was fond of flowers. Whistler's *Mother* broods nearby, her long-suffering counte-

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nance seeming to suggest she realized and regretted that her self-esteeming son was not a maker of masterpieces. A lot of luminous seascapes and landscapes by Boudin and Jongkind suggest their early influence on the young Impressionists, which is demonstrated by adjacent excellent examples of works by Pissarro, Monet, and Sisley. A batch of Orientalist trash is next, along with academic, story-telling pictures by the likes of Guillaumet, Legros, and Millais. The historic interest and aesthetic emptiness of these works, juxtaposed as they are with creations of enduring vivacity and loveliness, constitute still an intriguing challenge to the viewer's appreciation. We do not—not yet, anyway—question, I think, the intellectual provocation of having to contend with extremes of artistic achievement and with all the nuances of possible discrimination in between. Goethe's effigy, after all, warned us right away that we were letting ourselves in for a maximum of mental and visual exertion.

The Colosseum of orgiastic Napoleon III architectural folie de grandeur is, of course, the Opéra, that gargantuan gewgaw made of a hundred different kinds of marble, gilded bronze, mosaic, and red velvet, festooned with statuary and colonnades, ostentatious decoration and ornament run riot. Conceived to be the centerpiece of the "new" Paris ruthlessly being carved from the old by Baron Haussmann, the Opéra, does, in fact, represent a kind of pole round which the temporal and cultural construct of the Musée d'Orsay may be considered to turn. So it has not been forgotten. In the crypt of the cathedral, as in a latter-day reliquary, lies a marvelous scale model of the entire Opéra quartier, set below the floor so that visitors can walk about above it, peering down through transparent panels into spectral miniature streets. There is also a half-section scale model of the building itself, like a doll's opera house designed for a demented potentate like Ludwig II, who was just at that very period building his hideous palaces in Bavaria. Architectural design is an important aspect of the Orsay experience. There are models, maquettes, and renderings of numerous buildings other than the Opéra. Most spectacular of all exhibits in this department is inevitably a portrait of the entire French capital, an immense, panoramic, aerial view painted in 1855 by an artist called Victor Navlet, who must have spent months aloft in the Parisian heavens making studies from his balloon; the precision of his picture is nearly photographic but at the same time so nicely executed by a human hand as to flatter the discernment of those who recognize reality at a glance.

Leaving the art of architecture thus presided over by proud Paris, and led by the legitimate excitement of everything already displayed to rouse it, we now ascend to the topmost level of the resuscitated structure for the climactic museological rendezvous. Knowing what's coming—the dozen indubitably great painters who consecrated the glory of Paris in the last third of the Orsay time frame—we are ready to be bowled over, and anybody in love with art will be. Mere flirtation, however, let alone sentimental interest or, even worse, social intercourse, will not do, and consequently a majority of visitors can be expected to carp about the environment created to accommodate their communion with the masterpieces which they have the audacity to "adore." A lot of complaint, indeed, has been heard about the off-white walls of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist galleries. The lighting, too, a brilliant but not glaring mélange of natural and artificial illumination from above, has provoked plenty of objection. And the supposedly monotonous hanging of the paintings in eye-level rows is severely criticized by many. This is all idle chatter. The paintings are there, asking only for our eyes to overflow with the vision of them. And what paintings! What paintings! Manet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley, Monet, Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, the Douanier Rousseau, Redon, Bonnard, and more, much more. More than eyes can hope to cope with. It is ungracious to say that we miss a masterwork

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from Cézanne's last period and a major painting by Seurat, but it's fair to add that we miss almost nothing else. I think there are a few too many chocolate-box Renoirs and that maybe Sisley didn't need so much room. Never mind. There is all of Degas's sculpture, exhibited with an admirable understanding of his ambition to render mass and movement united. The Cézanne gallery is a stunning vindication of his passionate, obstinate effort to make out of nature something permanent and immutable like the art of museums. And at the opposite pole of aesthetic dedication is Monet's ineffable "eye." The pastels by Degas, Manet, Redon are breathtaking in their powdery finesse and verve. And what about the sixteen sketches on cardboard by Lautrec? Superb! I forgot to mention Caillebotte and Guillaumin, Signac, Cross, Sérusier, and Emile Bernard. All present and handsomely accounted for. The final galleries show early Vuillard at his best—modest, intimate, incomparably discreet—before he became a lesser figure than his friend Bonnard, also beautifully represented here.

Having experienced so much and come with supreme delectation to the climax of everything we'd been led to look forward to, we might ideally have been prepared for the Musée d'Orsay to let us depart with our ecstasy intact. This is not to be. The Orsay experience gives discipline precedence over delight, and the historical lesson is the one we are set to learn. In a word, art history is art's goal. Now, it is instructive, of course, and realistic to be on familiar terms with the prospect of death, not only as a personal eventuality but also as the ultimate denouement of our civilization. To contemplate this prospect may not be particularly pleasant, especially on premises dedicated to the glorification of man's quest for immortality, but a very large proportion of Orsay's terminal itinerary is devoted to dead works by dead artists. So be it. Anyway, the greatest creators have always had death very much on their minds, and so, perhaps, despite an understandable repugnance for carrion, we do have something positive to learn from all this inanimate art. Most of it can be approximately described as symbolist or naturalist. That is, it evidently wants to convey a significance relevant to its subject matter which the painted or sculpted image alone is not sufficiently expressive to convey. It wants to be Pygmalion's statue. The greatness of this aspiration, oddly enough, appears very often to have begotten products corresponding to it in dimension, as if size represented substance, and the huge galleries opening off the cathedral mezzanine are replete with gigantic, vacant canvases. For sheer, unbridled vulgarity paintings like *The Harvesters' Pay* by Lhermitte, *Cain* by Cormon, *The School of Plato* by Delville, *The Dream* by Detaille—the list could be prolonged ad nauseam—are incomparable: truly egregious rubbish. The trouble, and perhaps the point, is that they will probably please not only revisionist art historians but also a considerable proportion of the crowd. They tell a story, and the public appreciates a story, no matter that it be maudlin and trite. As aspects of art history these overblown prototypes of official taste are unbearably redundant, but at least they provide horrible documentation of everything that Manet, Monet, and Cézanne were actually up against when they set out to seduce the world.

Orsay gives a nod, a rather condescending and understandably casual nod, to the fact that a bit of painting of historical and even artistic interest took place beyond the frontiers of France during this period. There is a nice Winslow Homer, also a small portrait by Eakins so resolutely honest that it reveals in a devastating flash everything bogus and affected about Andrew Wyeth. The Pre-Raphaelite sham at its most meretricious is represented by a puffed-up pseudo-Michelangelo signed Burne-Jones. A leaden allegory by Franz von Stuck drags in *fin de siècle* Germany, an insipid Böcklin Switzerland, lamentable daubs by Mancini and Morbelli Italy, Breitner Holland, Mašek Czechoslovakia. But why go on?

Portrait painting as a separate genre gets attention, too. The Orsay docents have done

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their homework. The sovereigns of the salons are all here, flashy, paid to please and pleased to, alas. Boldini, Bonnat, Besnard, Jacques-Emile Blanche, even J. S. Sargent, who hated to but had to, picture their subjects in the glassy-eyed, high taxidermy style that became fashionable after photography took over the business of recording people's features.

Several galleries are devoted to Art Nouveau furniture, and one to the painstaking reconstruction of an entire dining room in this convoluted style. What a pall of odious decorum and ludicrous luxuriance clings to these premises.

Let's press on for fear an ever-so-slight lassitude might begin to blur our perceptions. It's true, to be sure, that the planners of the Orsay experience have not expected every visitor to see everything the first time. They want us to return and return and yet again to return, as we used to do, of course, when museums were mainly populated by people in love with art, when the general public was neither interested nor invited. Today things are different. Lassitude is likely to be a very real part of the price of admission. But good discipline does not tolerate complaining. The curriculum is clear: a new museum asks for new eyes. En avant!

A lot more junk sculpture by the likes of Deloye, Gérôme, Fremiet, and Barrias—the last represented by a really hilarious life-size group of alligator hunters—leads up along the open shelf of the mezzanine. If Orsay is to be considered a cathedral, then the center mezzanine is its high altar. Enthroned here we find a single artist present for our veneration. He should not come as a surprise. In the history of Western culture since the end of the Dark Ages only a handful of men have held their contemporaries in such imaginative thrall that they were looked upon not as mere artists but as living embodiments of the creative principle so all-powerful that they came to be viewed virtually as gods. Fitting exactly within the Orsay time frame, one single individual lived up to this superhuman criterion in his lifetime, a Frenchman, of course, and, even better, a Parisian: Rodin. Since that day Picasso alone has contrived to endow himself and his creations with such divine status, and it seems now, a dozen years after his death, that he is likely to have won an enduring measure of immortality. Not so Rodin. Soon after the celebrated sculptor's demise his reputation took a precipitous plunge, from which it has never since recovered. The reasons for this fall from grace are highly complex, if not necessarily obscure, and may have a lot to do with the abyss which in Rodin's time, and in his art, divided official, "acceptable" art from art invested with a profound and honest expression of the creator's innermost being. That abyss, be it said in passing, is fully explored in the Musée d'Orsay, and constitutes one of the museum's truest realms of innovation and interest. It is fitting, consequently, that Rodin should be centrally enshrined, since the re-deification of defunct gods is certainly conceived to be an inducement for our excursion through the abyss. Well-meant efforts to restore the reputation of Rodin have not been lacking in the last three decades but all have failed, as Orsay fails, because the sculptor's major works—*The Gate of Hell, Ugolin, The Muse,* even *Balzac*—strain so palpably for greatness that they are undone by the very muscularity, the fustian contortion, of the sculptor's overpowering talent.

If Rodin fails—despite his polymorphous sex appeal—to rouse our most passionate admiration, then what's to be said for his successor Bourdelle? Lots of people like his rough-hewn, emotive, preclassical, Herculean statuary. The brooding, dark-browed bust of Beethoven, virtually a Bourdelle trademark, is inevitably present. But we catch no echo of the *Eroica.* Bourdelle sought his inspiration and placed his creative faith in the immemorial, self-perpetuating continuity of Western civilization, and when it collapsed into anarchy his art was a minor victim. Maillol, his contemporary, less visionary, more down-to-earth, a Mediterranean sensualist, survives a little better precisely by reason of his earthiness, his palpable, perennial delight in the female principle

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and form. Ponderous, perhaps, a bit obvious in their plenteous pulchritude, Maillol's Venuses sustain their appeal mainly as objects of aesthetic nostalgia, not as telling innovations in the history of sculpture. The Musée d'Orsay contains a large amount of statuary. The best of it cannot come close to the supreme achievements of the French painters.

Leaving this bulky issue gratefully behind, we come upon more furniture, decorative objects, photographs. There are a few chairs, screens, stained glass windows by Adolf Loos and Frank Lloyd Wright, conscientious evocations of activities that had little to do with Paris and look like afterthoughts. There is even a phonograph record of Caruso singing an aria from *Manon.* Happily we don't hear it.

The end is in sight. Some minor but big Vuillards, a couple of effulgent Bonnards, a few Fauves, a Munch, even a Strindberg, lead us to the final, climactic feature of the Orsay experience. It is a brilliant, magisterial effect. It comes, indeed, as close to an expression of genius as the work of the museum curator can hope to come, because it sets a work of genius into the most challenging, provocative, and revealing juxtaposition possible between its own inherent qualities and the qualities of all the works of art that keep it company, while at the same time confronting the viewer with a prodigious synthesis of the aesthetic extravaganza to which it stands as proud climax and epitome. This work, needless to say, is French, pre-eminently a product of the School of Paris, a large, early oil by Henri Matisse entitled *Luxe, calme et volupté.* No other great artist of his time so thoroughly explored, tested, and mastered his own native tradition as Matisse, then going on to refine, superintend, and glorify it. Matisse is the logical, inevitable, and legitimate descendant of the entire Orsay genealogy, the only one who can in himself in one work sum it all up and with a masterpiece write finis to an enterprise which so appropriately epitomizes itself. By selecting a Matisse to be the ultimate objective of Goethe's encyclopedic gaze, Françoise Cachin and her colleagues have demonstrated that they saw all along, even if we sometimes may not have, what they were looking for, and that their vision of a museum is the crystallization of a lucid and definitive idea.

Emerging, then, from the Musée d'Orsay, satisfied, indeed sated, blinking a bit to discover that we are only in Paris, after all, do we find the city transfigured by everything we've seen? Definitely. The love affair with art has been consummated to an extent that redeems and sublimates even the disappointments and vexations characteristic of any love affair. Without insisting too much or excessive modesty, either, Orsay has so effectively worked itself up to be a cultural compendium combining civic pride with aesthetic clairvoyance that it can look across at the Louvre itself with self-assurance. Paris, not to say the world, will already be wondering how it ever got along without this "total" museological experience. Business, moreover, promises to be bullish. Impressionism is now quoted on the Bourse, and crowds that have no business being in museums like nothing better than museums which have gone into the business of pleasing crowds. The onetime factory of travel has been made over into a factory for entertaining tourists, accommodating large crowds of people who don't know where they want to go and consequently are in no hurry to get there. Orsay is big, new, unique. It will do the job. And yet . . . when we've looked at thirty-four Cézannes and twice that many Monets, all those dancers by Degas, and the Manets and the Renoirs, at this, at that, at Carpeaux, Rodin, and Maillol, let alone the vases by Gallé, the faded copies of *Le Petit Journal,* French and German military headgear, plus Sarah Bernhardt's negligee, fan, pocketbook, and opera glasses, do we discover that we have new eyes? Not really. But then . . . one of the lovely lessons of an authentic love affair—and of civilization, too—is study in the art of growing old. And the Orsay experience *even* includes intimations of how best to do that. Merci!

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What is "modern" poetry?

by Bruce Bawer

Many a critic, determined to speak with clarity and certitude upon the dauntingly ambiguous subject of modern poetry in English—or upon modernism in general, for that matter—has found himself invoking the famous words of Virginia Woolf, who, in her 1924 lecture "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," claimed to know precisely when the modern era began. "On or about December, 1910," she declared firmly, "human character changed." Meaning what? Meaning that sometime around 1910, many men and women of intelligence and culture—traumatized by, among other things, the technological revolution, Darwin's challenge to conventional notions about the sacredness and significance of the human condition, and Freud's teachings on consciousness and sexuality—found themselves groping toward a somewhat different understanding of the nature of reality, a new means of responding aesthetically to life. A number of cultural events helped them to find their way. In London alone, for instance, there was the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibit (which provided many Englishmen with their first look at the canvases of Picasso, Cézanne, and Matisse) and the 1911 debut of Diaghilev's Russian ballet; at about this time, too, readers who had been weaned on Meredith and Kipling were able to read Dostoevsky and Freud in their first English translations.

It was in this atmosphere of artistic revolution that modernist poetry was born. The simplest way of describing modernist poetry is to say that, in subject matter, in language, and in form, it sought to conquer territory that poetry had rarely if ever entered. To Pound and Eliot and their contemporaries, the universe seemed a great deal less rational and more complex than the poetry of most previous ages (particularly the nineteenth century) had recognized, and they were determined to create a poetry that would reflect this new awareness with seriousness and force. For most, this determination resulted in the writing of poetry that was more precise, ironic, witty, dry, and unsentimental than that of earlier generations. But it is hard to generalize about this matter; different poets had different notions of precisely what new territory modernist poetry should occupy, and the influences upon which they based these notions were wildly various. Among them were the seventeenth-century English Metaphysical poets and the nineteenth-century French Symbolists; Chinese ideogrammatic writing and Japanese art; the philosophies of Henri Bergson (who exalted intuition over intelligence), of Nietzsche (who argued that one must obliterate consciousness in order to act), and of F. H. Bradley (who saw each man as, so to speak, an island); the free verse of Walt Whitman and the *vers libre* of France; Ford Madox Ford's injunction to write plainly and directly; Remy de Gourmont's characterization of poetic creation as an act of "sensibility" and "fusion"; Théophile Gautier's notion of

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"l'art pour l'art"; and Walter Pater's remark that one should "burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame."

Profound differences, then, divided the modernist poets. Some regarded themselves as rebels against bourgeois normality and led bohemian lives; others lived remarkably ordered existences as professionals or men of business. Some saw the writing of modernist poetry as a means of breaking with their cultural heritage, of slicing through the artificiality of civilized life to the supposed primitivism at the heart of the human spirit; others saw it as the quintessential act of the civilized mind, a way of bringing centuries of cultural traditions to bear upon a contemporary scene in search of its historical bearings. Compared with the poetry of previous decades, modernist poetry was not only more consciously symbolic and mythic, but at once more colloquial and more high-toned, more engaged with the present moment and more aware of the weight of the past. If Ezra Pound created, in his *Cantos*, a comprehensive, allusive, polyglot poetry the likes of which the world had never quite seen, William Carlos Williams wrote poems that were aggressively spare and literal-minded, and strictly American in their idiom; if Wallace Stevens's poetry contemplated the philosophical question of reality and the imagination, Williams's watchword was "No ideas but in things."

The multiplicity of modernist poetry is equaled only by the complexity of what came before and after. The work of T. S. Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Williams, and their contemporaries was preceded, and has been succeeded, by decades of poetry some of which is distinctly nonmodernist and some of which abounds in modern characteristics but is decidedly different from *The Waste Land*, *Paterson*, *Harmonium*, and *Cantos*. Indeed, if there is any critical question as problematic as "What is modernism?" it is "What is postmodernism?" And then there are a number of major poets whose positions in the grand scheme are notoriously hard to assign. For instance, is Yeats a modern poet? Is Hardy? Is Frost?

In writing *A History of Modern Poetry*, then, David Perkins—an English professor at Harvard University—has taken on a most challenging subject. In two capacious volumes—the first of which appeared in 1976, and the second of which has recently been issued by Harvard University Press[1]—Professor Perkins traces the course of American and British poetry from the 1890s through the present, and manages to cover virtually every movement of consequence and to say something about even the most obscure poets of each period. This is a history not merely of the modernist movement, or even of Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, and other twentieth-century poetic luminaries; it is a history of the Laurence Binyons and Francis Ledwidges, the David Gascoynes and William Stanley Braithwaites. Professor Perkins's aim, in devoting so much attention to these minor and all but forgotten figures, is not to restore their reputations, but rather to place the great and remembered poets in their proper contexts—to give a picture, in short, of what the poetry scene actually looked like at any given time. Apparently unafraid that he might miss the forest for the trees, Professor Perkins plunges into the wood almost immediately, explores it slowly and patiently, taking time to examine even the most feeble specimens, and only rarely steps back to find his bearings or to enjoy a larger view. The consequences of this *modus operandi,* alas, are less than felicitous.

Taken together, the two volumes of Professor Perkins's history constitute something of a two-act drama about the rise and fall of the revolutionary movement that he refers to as "high Modernism." The first volume began with the English and Irish poets of the 1890s, many of them forerunners of high modernism who, in various ways, rebelled against the poetic orthodoxy represented by versifiers like Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell; some of these rebels

1 *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*, by David Perkins; Harvard University Press, 659 pages, $25.

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(e.g., George Russell) were members of the world-weary, quasi-mystical "Celtic Twilight" movement, while others (Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson)—calling themselves Decadents, Aesthetes, Symbolists, or Impressionists—belonged to the post-Pre-Raphaelite London avant-garde, with its emphasis on form and beauty and the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*. Against this asocial, contemplative movement arose a patriotic, socially relevant "Narrative Protest" (Rudyard Kipling, Alfred Noyes). Meanwhile, in America, the homely and idealistic "Genteel Tradition," embodied by mediocrities like Madison Cawein and George Cabot Lodge, as well as by the hugely popular James Whitcomb Riley, was being resisted by Edwin Markham's poems of social protest, by Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman's "vagabond" lyrics, by the bitter free verse of Stephen Crane, and by the ironic, detached poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, whom Professor Perkins considers to be the first modern American poet.

With the beginning of the new century, a wide variety of poetry, much of it perceived as "modern"—and much of it, in England at any rate, a reaction to the *fin de siècle* poetic revolution—began to appear in England and America. Professor Perkins views this as a period of "Popular Modernism"; Hardy, Frost, the Edwardian "craftsmen" (de la Mare, Housman), the Georgians, the war poets, the "democratic" poets (Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay), the "conservative and regional" poets (Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie), the black poets of the Twenties (Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer), the post-World War One British poets (Edith Sitwell, D. H. Lawrence), and even the Imagists (H. D., Amy Lowell) spoke to a relatively wide audience. But with the rise of "the high Modernist mode" came "the compressed, disjunctive, oblique, allusive, and sardonic writing for an elite that we now associate with Modernism." The last part of Volume One was devoted to lengthy examinations of the early careers of this movement's prime exponents—Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Williams, and Marianne Moore—and the oeuvre of the century's greatest poet in English, W. B. Yeats.

Volume Two begins with a section on "The Age of High Modernism." A substantial chapter on T. S. Eliot (whose *Four Quartets* Professor Perkins cites as "the greatest long poem yet written in English in the twentieth century") is followed by chapters on Hart Crane and Auden, a chapter on e. e. cummings, Archibald MacLeish, and Robinson Jeffers, and chapters on "The Poetry of Critical Intelligence" (Ransom, Tate, Empson, Yvor Winters) and the Oxford poets. A chapter on "The English Romantic Revival, 1934-1945" (Dylan Thomas, Edwin Muir) begins with an explanation of the "retreat from the high Modernist style" that began in the 1930s. "[T]his style," Professor Perkins writes, "imposed serious limitations on both the powers and the potential readership of poetry . . . . Moreover, the achievements of Modernism in the 1920s were too brilliant to be excelled in their own mode." Most important of all, however, was that Modernism "cut poetry off from the Romantic traditions of the nineteenth century." But Modernism was not dead yet; Part Two, entitled "The Resurgence of Pound, Williams, and Stevens," explores the influence that these three poets (as well as postwar modernists like Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky) had upon postmodernism, which is the subject of Part Three. In this section, Professor Perkins considers, in turn, Robert Penn Warren, Theodore Roethke, and Elizabeth Bishop (who "fused essential principles of the Modernist revolution in style with the more directly emotional utterance of the Romantic mode"); Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell (who "broke with the New Critical style" and adopted "a more casual and immediate way of writing," but "never completely relinquished their former standards"); Philip Larkin and other poets of "The Movement" (who "reacted strongly against the neo-Romantic mode of the war years" in quietly reflective, moralistic poems); Charles Tomlinson, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, and Thom Gunn (whose poems of

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"tension and interplay" reacted in turn against Larkin and company); Seamus Heaney and other Irish poets; Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and other students of Pound; Frank O'Hara and the New York School; Allen Ginsberg and the San Francisco counterculture; Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, and other poets who rejected "civilization"; Sylvia Plath and other women; Amiri Baraka and other blacks; and, finally, Ashbery and A. R. Ammons and James Merrill (whose trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* Professor Perkins considers the greatest long American poem since Whitman).

Though there is much about Professor Perkins's ultra-inclusive approach that is commendable, it has resulted in a book that might well confuse an unsophisticated reader as to the relative importance of various poets. In some instances, Professor Perkins's apportionment of space is particularly egregious: Edward Thomas receives less space than Robert Bridges or John Davidson or John Gould Fletcher, and hardly any more than Alfred Noyes or George Barker; Delmore Schwartz gets less than any of them, and Robert Duncan gets more than all of them put together. Derek Walcott is covered in four sentences, Richard Howard in three, and X. J. Kennedy has his name mentioned. By comparison, Ridgeley Torrence receives a whole quarter of a page, Arthur Davison Ficke half a page, James Schuyler two-thirds of a page, Galway Kinnell four and a half pages, James Wright five.

For the most part, Professor Perkins's approach wavers between that of a relatively objective literary historian and that of a tendentious critic; at times, however, the tone becomes positively casual, and the book reads less like either history or criticism than like an off-the-cuff tally of personal preferences. Just before pronouncing judgment on Pound's *magnum opus*, he says, "How good are the *Cantos*? Or, since evaluation is always personal, how much do I admire and enjoy them?" He is not above commenting that such-and-such a book "makes good browsing" or summing up a discussion of a poet by saying that a certain poem will live because of its "human interest." Remarkably, he refuses to recognize the influence of the great nineteenth-century thinkers upon the modern movement, choosing to explain the decline of the rational and optimistic Victorian sensibility, and its replacement by modern skepticism and nihilism, as the result of "cultural disappointment and the need for novelty." "Human life and history," Professor Perkins writes,

> are such that ideals to which the heart is strongly committed will, sooner or later, appear inadequate. The way things turn out always violates the ideal hopes, which are then felt to have been out of touch with reality all along. And even were this not the case, men cannot be inspired by the same ideals indefinitely.

When Professor Perkins discusses the *fin de siècle* poet John Davidson's crisis of faith, he speaks of it as if it were an isolated event in literary history; the name Darwin is chastely avoided. It is not until page 301 of the first volume that he finally mentions Darwin—along with Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Sir James Frazer—and then it is to assert that, "[d]espite the views of many commentators, the immediate cause of [the broadening of subject matter in American poetry] lies in the reaction of poets to their late Victorian predecessors, not in the new experiences and perceptions many modern poets may be supposed to have acquired"; he goes on to speak sarcastically of the supposed common perception of Darwin, et al., as "pillars of cloud and fire that went before the modern mind in its wandering." Indeed, he seems determined to omit—or, at least, to avoid a real discussion of—every important nonpoetic influence upon twentieth-century poetry. This is, of course, a crucial failing, for modern poetry, perhaps more than any other body of literature in human history, consciously drew its influences from far and wide.

Likewise, Professor Perkins has more to say in his first volume about the obscure Nineties poet Madison Cawein, for instance,

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than about Gerard Manley Hopkins. And though he can't avoid Walt Whitman—by far the single most important influence upon twentieth-century American poetry—he tries very hard to do so. He refers to "the tradition of Whitman" when necessary, but manages to ignore the fact that it is essentially a modern tradition. He does not even mention Whitman until page 84 of the first volume; on page 94 he speaks of the "rival inclinations of modern American poetry" as "Genteel" and "Whitmanic" but doesn't elaborate. Throughout the remainder of the first volume, he is forced to refer to Whitman again and again—as a precursor of George Cabot Lodge, Richard Hovey, Stephen Crane, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Isaac Rosenberg, John Gould Fletcher, Carl Sandburg, Orrick Johns, Witter Bynner, Langston Hughes, A. E. Coppard, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams—but in every instance succeeds in burying Whitman's name in a perfunctory list of influences.

The book has structural problems, too. The text is marred, for one thing, by numerous clumsy cross-references (and, in the first volume, by distracting references to material that will appear in Volume Two). The typical Perkins chapter, moreover, is exasperatingly Balkanized—broken down into several divisions, each dealing with a specific subtopic (a poet, a movement, a method, what-have-you). All too often, the way in which Professor Perkins divides up the chapter has the effect of turning what might have been a well-focused treatment of the topic at hand into a choppy, repetitious, backtracking mess. Indeed, one finds again and again that certain facts and anecdotes are retailed not once or twice but three or four times—the first time at the beginning of a major section of the book, the second time at the beginning of a chapter within that section, the third and fourth times in various divisions of that chapter. (By the end of the second volume, one would almost swear that Professor Perkins has used the clumsy phrase "To repeat . . ." at least a thousand times.)

Take the chapter on Imagism. In its first division, "The Imagist Movement," Professor Perkins offers a chronology of the movement, discussing in its proper place (though not quoting) Pound's 1913 "statement of Imagiste principles" and thereupon following the movement into 1914 and beyond, when it fell under the sway of Amy Lowell. In the chapter's second division, "The Imagist Doctrine," Professor Perkins jumps back to 1913 to quote that statement of Imagiste principles, then proceeds to a discussion of Richard Aldington's 1915 preface to the Imagist anthology. In the chapter's third division, "The Imagist Poem," Professor Perkins jumps back to 1912 and discusses T. E. Hulme's poem "Autumn" and H. D.'s poem "Oread." The final division, "Some Imagist Poets," summarizes the poetic careers of H. D., John Gould Fletcher, Herbert Read, and (very briefly) Henry Bellamann—as well as that of Amy Lowell, whose career as an Imagist promoter and anthologist has already been examined as part of "The Imagist Movement." It's all very mixed up, and needlessly so; precious little effort would have been required to reorganize this hodgepodge into a coherent discussion of Imagism.

And that's not all. A hundred pages later, in the chapter on Ezra Pound's early career, Professor Perkins retreads much of the same ground—and, more importantly, offers for the first time some important material on the background of Imagism. In particular, he devotes several pages to T. E. Hulme and Ford Madox Ford, his purpose being to convince the reader that Hulme and Ford were the *real* authors of the principles of Imagism. Bafflingly, Professor Perkins—who himself all but ignores Hulme and Ford in his chapter on Imagism—rather heatedly complains, in the Pound chapter, about the way that most critics slight these two men's contribution to the Imagist movement.

To be sure, some of Professor Perkins's accounts of poets and movements are quite admirable. His description of the doctrine of Aestheticism, for instance, is discriminat-

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ing and nicely detailed, and the connections that he makes among Yeats, Wilde, and Stevens, as well as the distinctions he draws between those poets and the Romantics, are perceptive and useful. But too often Professor Perkins's descriptions of his poets' work leave much to be desired. Superficially, these descriptions are fine; he lists the themes and forms the poets favor, the words they use most frequently, their tonal characteristics and influences. But, for whatever reason, the descriptions often fail to evoke a clear picture of anything; they seem mechanical, the work of someone who has developed a highly sophisticated critical vocabulary but has little real feeling for poetry or for poetry criticism. He goes in for unilluminating generalizations and abstractions (John Cowper Powys's verse "is of a distinguished, minor kind. It is firmly articulated, intelligent, and genuinely felt, but its form and phrasing lack freshness"), and his occasional readings of individual poems consist for the most part of paraphrase and facile "analysis"; one rarely has any clue as to why *this* poem has been chosen for examination, and exactly what makes it typical of its author's work.

Many of these discussions of individual poets, furthermore, are full of inane biographical detail. In the chapter on Frost, Professor Perkins includes pointless references to the poet's sister, Jeannie, to his years at Lawrence High School, and to the "dramatic vicissitudes" of Frost's courtship of his wife-to-be, Elinor White; several sentences of the chapter on Robert Lowell are devoted to such matters as the poet's teaching career, opposition to the war in Vietnam, support of the presidential candidacy of Eugene McCarthy, and so forth. Similarly, Professor Perkins's discussion of Madison Cawein focuses as much upon a handful of recondite personal details as upon his poetry: Cawein "had during the course of his career at least thirteen extensive notices in the Louisville papers. His admirers gave him a silver loving cup on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his first publication and presented a bronze bust of the poet to the Free Public Library . . . ." And the pages on Sandburg conclude as follows:

> He was much read and admired. In 1926 the first volume of his ambitious biography of Lincoln appeared . . . . The huge effort was completed in 1939 . . . . In 1940 he was suggested as a candidate for President (he declined, preferring Roosevelt). He also collected folksongs, which he published in *The American Songbag* (1927). He developed a fetching platform performance: he would recite some poems, sing folksongs, which he accompanied with a guitar, and intersperse poems and songs with homely philosophy and anecdotes. In 1946 his birthplace was dedicated as a museum. In 1956 the University of Illinois paid $50,000 for four tons of his papers.

Though some of this information may be interesting, most of it has no place in a brief passage on Sandburg's poetry—especially since Professor Perkins includes such details about some poets and not about others, and since he protests continually that space doesn't permit treatment of matters of considerably more importance than the price of Sandburg's private papers. (Professor Perkins omits discussion of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Eliot's other pre-*Waste Land* poems, for example, so that he may "gain the necessary space" to write about *The Waste Land*.)

Silly "critical" passages are so numerous and so varied in these two large volumes that one can do little more than briefly examine one of them. For instance, Professor Perkins writes as follows about Stephen Spender:

> "Not Palaces," a splendid poem, ends declaring that "our programme" ("our" is not editorial but refers to some collective group or party) is "Death to the killers, bringing light to life." A program of killing killers may disturb the moral ideas of some readers, but "bringing light to life," whatever it may mean, overwhelms protest, for everyone must be on the side of light and life.

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After this unique bit of critical analysis, Professor Perkins quotes from Spender's sentimental, utopian poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" (in which the speaker prays for the slum children's world to "Run azure on golden sands," etc.), and comments that "[s]uch words do the heart good even if they do not satisfy the mind."

As one might suspect after reading such commentary, Professor Perkins likes to be seen as politically "correct." He remarks that Berryman's use of "the black talk of the minstrel shows" is "in horrible taste." In a general discussion of post-World War Two American poetry he writes quite solemnly and sympathetically that

> [o]ur poets are . . . deeply alienated from our imperialistic, bureaucratic, consumerist, commercially manipulative civilization. "Moloch," as Allen Ginsberg calls it, is the vast, entrenched system of economic, political, and ideological power: the government, armed forces, police, business corporations, labor unions, and media. Disgust and fear of this and its manifestations are voiced by approximately half of our contemporary poets; the others are not of an opposite opinion, but are too urbane in style or too personal in subject matter to voice such emotions directly and strongly. But of course "Moloch" seems quite impervious to the fulminations of poets. As one of a huge population, caught like everyone else in the toils of history, of the bureaucratic state, and of the large institutions in which we work, shop, and amuse ourselves, the poet cannot feel that his or her ideas and desires make any difference. What we experience as our own ideas and desires may, in any case, have been instilled in us by propaganda and advertising.

Professor Perkins is careful, too, to say the correct things about postwar female poets. He observes, for example, that Sylvia Plath's poems can be read not only biographically and psychoanalytically but "as expressions of women's emotions in a society that frustrates the self-fulfillment of women." And he describes an Adrienne Rich poem as "a beautiful poem that commemorates the lonely, stunted lives of immigrant or pioneer women in their patriarchal society." Though for the most part, moreover, his verdicts on poets in Volume Two seem fair, he is notably lenient on the left-wing Oxford poets and more than a bit hard on the reactionary Fugitives. He describes Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," for instance, as "a vampire ritual, draining blood from many poets without coming to life itself."

One intriguing characteristic of this study is that Professor Perkins frequently describes poets, movements, and the distinction between them as "vague" or "hazy" or "unclear"; these words appear so often, in fact, that before long one realizes that it is Professor Perkins's thinking, not his subject, that is fuzzy. "Dowson's famous lines," he writes, "seem on his page vaguely 'classical' and fin-de-siècle." "The so-called 'Celtic Twilight' makes a hazy border between the more traditional poetry of the nineteenth century and the aesthetic-impressionist-symbolist work of the 1880s and 1890s." (That word *makes*, by the way, is typical of Professor Perkins's clumsy diction.) "In the 1890s Queen Victoria still reigned and so did all we vaguely identify as Victorian." "The poems of Fiona Macleod are romantic-mystical celebrations of a face, a love, a vague something that is somewhere beyond." After quoting from a poem by Lionel Johnson, Professor Perkins writes that "such vague and haunting music is not characteristic."

A particular weakness of Professor Perkins's discussions of individual poets is his attraction to imprecise words like *romantic* and *classical*, which he overuses, employs in many different senses, and refuses to define. Sometimes he even combines them, as we have seen, describing one poet's work as "romantic-mystical" and another's as "aesthetic-impressionist-symbolist." (Before long, one begins to suspect that this is some sort of tongue-in-cheek academic joke, with Professor Perkins deliberately playing the part of a Harvard Square Polonius.) Sometimes this imprecision results in considerable confusion. For instance, early in the first volume

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Professor Perkins identifies Victorian "agreeability" with the "beauty" against which Picasso rebelled; thirty or so pages later he speaks of "beauty" as the *cri de coeur* of the Aesthetic rebellion against the Victorian sensibility, and fails to account for—or even to take note of—the apparent contradiction.

Incredibly, Professor Perkins often assumes that his readers already know about the poets under discussion, and that he therefore has only to throw out a few names or catchphrases in order to suggest the flavor of a given movement or period or milieu. At the beginning of his section on the 1890s, for instance, he lists some names—William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, William Ernest Henley, and so forth—and then says that "The names mentioned so far suggest the quality and kinds of poetry in the 1890s." Likewise, by way of suggesting that Arthur Symons was a significant participant in the Irish movement known as the "Celtic Twilight," Professor Perkins says that "There are poems, though not many, where Symons hears the crying of Sligo waters or walks in the fairy woods of Finvara." The assumption here is that the reader already knows that the crying of Sligo waters and the fairy woods of Finvara are the stuff of Celtic Twilight poetry—something that Professor Perkins has neglected to establish.

One might be able to overlook most of the shortcomings of Professor Perkins's study if only his style were engaging. But it is not. Indeed, awkward turns of phrase, badly chosen words, and inane images abound. Professor Perkins says of Padraic Colum that "[t]here are much humor and pathos in his writing" and refers to Maxwell Bodenheim's "mental fears"; he writes that William Vaughn Moody "possessed a large imaginative endowment" and that Moody's phrasing was "consistently above the level of the unrefreshed routine." (This is Perkinsese for "Moody's phrasing was refreshing, not routine.") His way of saying that Roy Fuller wrote pessimistic poetry is to say that "a minus sign stands before whatever he does or considers." He uses *miniature* as a verb, *slapdash* as a noun, *image* as a verb, and comes up with an adjectival form of *leitmotif*. Throughout the book, in discussing patterns of influence, he uses the word *catch* where most writers would use *borrow*, speaking of "[t]he rules of procedure Allen Ginsberg caught from Jack Kerouac," explaining that Dylan Thomas "caught . . . little from Auden," and noting that John Masefield "shared the endeavor, which he caught partly from Hardy and Kipling but especially from Yeats and Synge, to energize and enlarge the subject matter and idiom of poetry by turning directly to actual life." And just as John Masefield shares Yeats's endeavors, so Edward Dorn "shares Olson's grapple with large ideas as well as his open syntax."

Though Professor Perkins's tone is generally formal, at times it drops suddenly and without warning, as when he writes about Eliot that "his essays made appreciation of [the metaphysical poets] an 'in' attitude." And if the level of diction is relatively low for an academic study, every so often Professor Perkins gratuitously shows off his vocabulary. The word *eloign*, for instance, shows up twice in six pages (in both cases *remove* would have served equally well). At other times he would seem to be writing in a sort of pop-sociological lingo, as when he observes that nowadays "our own feelings of oneness with nature are less religiously and more existentially toned." Similarly, he writes as follows about American counterculture poets of the 1950s: "the middle-class family did not command their moral allegiance, and they sympathized with larger, more open groups of mutually supportive individuals." And then there's this sentence, probably the most unappealing one-line description of Dylan Thomas in existence: "He wants to celebrate the life-process totally."

To be sure, we owe Professor Perkins some points for bravery: he has rushed in where many have feared to tread. Prior to the publication of these two volumes, there was no large, definitive history of twentieth-century English-language verse—and, unfor-

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tunately, there still isn't. What is needed, I think, is a book that, while providing adequate coverage of the century's major poets, places more emphasis upon the philosophy of modernism—a book that recognizes modernism as a theme upon which each of the modern poets composed his own set of variations, a theme to which the postmodernists have provided counterpoint in a wide range of styles. For what is, in the end, most lacking from Professor Perkins's book is a conceptual structure; a recognition on his part that to consider modern poetry from a comprehensive and serious critical perspective necessitates not only passing judgment upon individual poems but also making intellectual and moral distinctions among a panoply of assumptions and procedures, as well as among an array of ideas about the relative value of form and freedom, objective creation and personal effusion, aesthetics and ideology. Modern poetry is, in short, a large and complex topic, a thousand-piece picture puzzle—and, alas, Professor Perkins (to borrow a phrase from Ezra Pound) simply cannot make it cohere.

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Poems *by William Virgil Davis, Elizabeth Spires, W. S. Di Piero, Peter Filkins & Charles Martin*

Landscape

How old the dark has become,
standing silent in these fields while
horses weave through each other's shadows.
They have come like warm rain
and run over the hills in the moonlight
and stood so long alone no one
impatient would ever notice them there.

When the wind and the winter return
the horses will still be here,
their silhouettes outlined in the pale moonlight,
standing still and silent on these hills
or stamping, splattering snow in small spills,
the whole scene turning slowly into landscape
like our own earliest memories.

—*William Virgil Davis*

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Eastern Neck Island

Up in the sky, this late in the day,
the sun and the moon face off.
The sun is a big orange ball,
the moon sheer as rice paper.

The lighthouse on Love Point
is lost in the glare.
It rises needle-like,
but nobody lives there.

Backlit by the sun, two
swans glide on the bay,
not touching each other,
not pulling away.

Two, two of a kind,
we walk the narrow, unkempt path,
one behind the other,
avoiding the saw-toothed trap

that waits for a small thing's hunger
as the hunter waits in his blind,
taking aim at the sun and the moon
in the cross-hairs of the gun.

The swans rise 'soul in soul,'
as the hunter brings down the sun,
their cries as they circle above
all unutterable names for love.

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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The celestial

Korean Buddhists traditionally keep this breed
in temple ponds.

When God made the angels, a man made me,
turning my gaze heavenward for a purpose
I know and do not know. The world
is a sphere that mirrors my pond, all things
have order here: the sun rushes
across the sky, pulling the moon
on a pale fishing line, and I see myself
printed among the stars, a great fish
swimming in the night's black sea.
Weeks pass into months, the year going
from warm to cool, bright to dull,
gingko leaves drifting down,
down, to slowly settle on pondbottom,
like pieces of ragged gold foil. I, too,
am streaked with gold along my spine and tail,
but am valued for my eyes, bulging
blue-green globes larger than my soul,
a small clear bubble wrapped around the purity
of nothing. It slips with each breath
from my astonished mouth and flies rapidly upward
—as prayers will sometimes—
but always catches on the pond's rough skin.
I twin until there are many of me.
I begin and begin.

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O Ghosts of the Upper World,
don't we see you in your shimmering robes,
peering through seven watery veils
that, lifted, reveal nothing behind the curtain?
Don't we hear you chanting?
Bells call you to the temple and you hurry away,
orange robes streaming, as if
you were running headlong into a violent wind.
We do not hurry as we take the world in
through our mouths, as sensation
passes through us, unconcerned
to be swimming toward where we've already been.
To *be,* not do: that is the lesson
we try to teach you.
We have heard of an underworld where fire
is the transforming element and water burns
quickly away to vapor,
but will not see it ever.

Our gaze is upward and forever.

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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The two old ladies of September

Arm-in-arm,
they seemed lost,
nudging each other
step and half-step
through the fog,

though cyclamens,
the few poor
sagging blooms
aflame in their fists,
said they've known

these fields for years,
those woods, that pond
where dragonflies
thrummed in bandy
too-tall reeds.

Their drift, a migrant
anger, slantwise,
toward the field
so green, flowers
lush and abundant

last year, before
a long dry spell
cut the soil
a jigsaw scramble
of brown clay.

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Their knowledge enraged
by two girls playing
skip-the-crack,
jangling bracelets
strung of red petals,

hooting, waving,
till the ladies
shrieked back: Jump!
Maybe, this time, the ground
won't eat you for new blood.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

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An old New England graveyard

At the field's far end, down by
the dredged and roaring stream,
past alleys of long light reaching
through windbreak maple and beech
to scrape an old barn ruddy,
despite its sagging loft,
you'll find them:

Headstones and
their heavings, those we label
"forgotten and ignored,"
as if we could forget them,
the dead, and all their trappings.

Listless, historical, bored—
no doubt they do not mind
the gate's low groan when opened
by the odd man out in spring,
who, there among the weeds,
the names, the graven phrase
or two, might find himself
reduced to those low whispers
of "Gardner, Doty, Nash . . . ,"

Or, considering the past,
hears in his own heart's knocking
the windy present beat,
takes measure of the stones,
makes note of their mossy touch,
straddles the tufted grass;
and closes the gate and goes home.

—*Peter Filkins*

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On yielding to whim

for D. G. *someone*
raised in a landscape short of rain

Someone imagines that he sees a cat
Crouching in these hot hills—another burns
For the lounging odalisk which he discerns
Couched in the same duncolored folds of what
Is, underneath, mere stone—despite its range
Of attitudes, characters, reveries . . . .
Two of the nearer hills, encouraged, rise
Slowly and languorously stretching change

Into a form made of the appetite
To find a form there, let the mind's eye trace
Imaginary lines to metaphor—
A cat? A woman? A moment and no more:
Mirages ordinary to a place
Stingy with water, generous with light.

—*Charles Martin*

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Dance

Love American-style

by Eva Resnikova

When Peter Martins took over as a co-ballet-master-in-chief at New York City Ballet four years ago, he had a hard act to follow. Things are still hard for him. His ballets are invariably judged against the unmatchable measure of Balanchine's rich legacy, and just as invariably pronounced inferior. In the works that depart most from the Balanchine canon, he presents an unflinchingly blunt vision of male-female relationships that makes many viewers uncomfortable.

Martins is very much his own man, and always has been. In his memoirs, *Far from Denmark,* published a year before Balanchine's death in 1983, Martins recounts the conflicts he had with Balanchine in his early years as a dancer at New York City Ballet, and then the "complex relationship" of master and student—not "without fear, distrust, and suspicion as well as affection, reverence, gratitude"—that developed when Martins began to choreograph. What he found in Balanchine was "the confirmation and demonstration" of his own "decided opinions" about dance.

Martins shared with Balanchine an abiding faith in the power and the moral weight of the classical vocabulary, as well as a highly developed musical intelligence. He does not have the technical apparatus of a musician that Balanchine—and no other choreographer—had, but he possesses an ability to fathom musical form that goes far beyond mere "musicality," that slippery term used by balletomanes and critics to describe a dancer's reactive sensitivity to music. Just as important, Martins, unlike so many of his colleagues with less musical acumen, recognizes the limitations inherent in an approach to musical analysis that relies exclusively on the ear. The most difficult score he has tackled is the *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos,* for the New York City Ballet's 1982 Stravinsky festival, and this was assigned him by Balanchine. In a PBS "Dance in America" presentation of his piano ballets, Martins admits that at first he was "intimidated" by the music; eventually, he says, he "fell in love" with it. Balanchine's perspicacity paid off: the *Concerto* was the work of most enduring value to emerge from the festival.

In two new ballets, given their premieres on January 15, Martins's choice of scores shows the courage of his musical convictions: Mozart's *Les Petits Riens,* and *Ecstatic Orange,* a recent composition by a young American composer. In the first instance, Martins runs the risk of being accused of triviality in eschewing symphonic form in favor of a suite of strictly conventional eighteenth-century dance music whose title alone invites condescension. In the second, he has committed himself in a way that many professional musicians—not to mention professional music critics—are loath to do, by taking a stand on an uncertified composer at the beginning of his career. The result is two highly accomplished ballets that confirm Martins's standing as the most talented classical choreographer of our day.

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Les Petits Riens is a modest work, but it is far from a trivial one. Consisting of an overture for full orchestra and thirteen numbers for smaller ensembles, the music is simple in form yet brimming with Mozartean charms. Martins has set it for eight dancers, four girls and four boys, all young members of the corps de ballet, whom he has costumed in balleticized eighteenth-century dress.

Following the Overture, in which all the dancers participate, Martins avoids monotony by varying the entrées: a boy enters at the end of the Allegro, a female solo, to sweep the girl into the wings; the couple that performs the Larghetto remains on stage for the allegro Gavotte; after dancing the Gavotte gracieuse alone, a girl is joined by a boy for the Pantomime; another Gavotte becomes a dance for all four boys; the final Andante brings back the entire cast.

The choreography is tricky but unspectacular, much like that of Bournonville, in whose style Martins was reared. There are Bournonville touches throughout *Les Petits Riens*: the side-by-side "mirror-image" dancing of the boy and girl that opens the first pas de deux, which also features flat-footed promenades; rarely encountered beaten steps for the four boys in the Gavotte, including entrechat en tournant (a beaten double air turn), soubresaut battu (a beating jump in fifth position that travels), and petits battements at the knee. But Martins also has a profound understanding of pointe work and of partnering, Bournonville's principal weaknesses. He uses partnering in an expressive rather than a spectacular manner, and often the expressive point is a musical one: the dreamy slow-motion temps de flèche in the Adagio, for example, and the moment in the Pantomime when the boy slows the girl's descent so that her landing in fondu révérence coincides with the last drawn-out note of the musical phrase.

Though formally *Les Petits Riens* is a *suite de danses,* it is more than just a string of display pieces. Taking his cues from the music, Martins has given his work a shape through its evolving mood, from the glittering public display of group dancing in the Overture, to the playfulness and tenderness of the various pas de deux, to the dignified and almost elegiac note of the final Andante, in which the four couples dance in unison. As the ballet draws to a close, the dancers link hands for a moment, acknowledge one another, then separate again into couples for a final révérence to the audience.

Superficially, *Les Petits Riens* resembles *Divertimento No. 15,* but Balanchine's Mozart is grander in style and more symmetrical in form: it concentrates on exposing the classical infrastructure of Mozart's score. What *Les Petits Riens* brings to mind are descriptions—all that remain—of Balanchine's discarded choreography for his first setting of the Mozart Divertimento in B flat, *Caracole.* Lincoln Kirstein, discussing this and other lost Balanchine choreographies, speaks of "delicacy of texture" and "quiet sweetness of expression"; Edwin Denby wrote of the ballet's "innocence" and "tender intimacy."

Les Petits Riens is about conventions: the mutually agreed-upon rules of behavior that make it possible for us to function in civilized society, as well as the rules that make possible the classical dance itself. *Ecstatic Orange* is about the passions that conventional behavior helps to keep in check. The score, written in 1985 by Michael Torke, then twenty-four, is ten and a half minutes long and employs a full orchestra, including a battery of percussion worthy of Varèse. It is in one movement with several changes of mood, accomplished mainly by variations in instrumentation. The music is anti-development: it rises to a number of crescendos, after one of which it ends, with no resolution. The outstanding initial impression made by the music was of a Stravinskyan ostinato pulse. Subsequent hearings revealed a strong element of repeated rhythmic fragments in the minimalist manner; but Torke's score has a nervous energy that is far removed from the "trance music" of Glass and Reich.

Martins has set the ballet for two principals (Heather Watts and Jock Soto), two male and two female demi-soloists, and a corps of six boys and six girls. It opens with

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the crouching corps arrayed on the stage, and the leads, looking petulant, standing at either side. They approach each other warily via several close-legged jumps; when they meet, they continue jumping, apparently in an attempt to upstage each other. Each places a hand on the other's shoulder, and their eyes meet for the first time.

When they dance together he holds her up in front of him, her turned-out legs bent beneath her. She opens them wide (a quote from Balanchine's *Bugaku*), then does the same when she is turned a hundred and eighty degrees to each side. At one point she pushes her knee, her shoulder, and then her head into position with her hand. He crouches and looks anxiously about him. She straddles him. He drags her from side to side at an angle while she performs passés. He pushes her head with her hand.

In the midst of all this there is a dance for the four demi-soloists during which the two boys manipulate one of the girls in extreme positions (hundred-and-eighty-degree penchées, upside-down lifts) while the other girl dances around them. At the end, the corps dancers run to the center of the stage and raise their arms, while the couple crouches. When the music stops there is a partial blackout, and the dancers, silhouetted against the glowing orange backdrop, slither rapidly to the floor as the couple shoots suddenly upward.

The costumes by Stephen Sprouse are a mistake. A young fashion designer who has made a name for himself producing Sixties pop-retro looks, Sprouse has dressed the dancers in black unitards with orange and pink Day-Glo trim on skirtlike drapes of fabric across the front of their costumes (skirts for men are very big on the current downtown dance scene right now). Soto's wide headband lends a disorientingly Japanese air to the proceedings. Quite apart from their unattractiveness, the costumes are unfortunate in that they invite a dismissive attitude toward a work that deserves to be taken seriously. (One critic compared *Ecstatic Orange* to *PAMTGG,* Balanchine's critically derided 1971 excursion into popular culture, and used the occasion to suggest that it was time City Ballet considered engaging outside choreographers.)

Ecstatic Orange is not as formally impressive as *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos,* the work it most resembles, if only because Michael Torke, talented though he is, is not Stravinsky. The new ballet's interest lies more in its dramatic concerns. The raw energy of the score provides the impetus for Martins's deepening exploration of the interaction of contemporary men and women that he began in his very first choreography, *Calcium Light Night,* a startlingly original pas de deux for Heather Watts and Daniel Duell to music by Charles Ives. The setting was a bare stage, harshly lit with neon; Watts was encased in a red unitard chopped off at armpits and ankles. There was an unusual combative element to the partnering, summed up in the ballet's final image: facing front, the two dancers push each other's faces away at arm's length. Martins has described his first ballet as "a statement of my perception of American manners and American character," and points out that it was from Watts, with whom he was "romantically involved" at the time, that he learned about "American style."

Martins continued his analysis of love American-style in *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos.* This time he divided the male role between two dancers, who might be seen as two sides to Martins's own character: Ib Andersen, like Martins a product of the Royal Danish Ballet, and Jock Soto, at the time a young member of the corps de ballet, now a leading dancer and something of a choreographic alter ego for Martins, who was no doubt attracted by Soto's stone-faced impassivity, as well as his exotic Americanness (Soto is part Navajo). Heather Watts was again cast in the ballerina role. This time her costume was even starker: a white unitard that revealed every nook and cranny of her utilitarian body. Viewers who were shocked at Martins's apparent cruelty in exposing Watts in this way were missing the point. Martins was celebrating in *Concerto*

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the straightforwardness and honesty, brutal though it may sometimes be, that attracted him to Watts, and that attracts him to Americans in general.

Ecstatic Orange corrects the *Concerto*'s major flaw: the use of a second lead boy. Martins has said that he was seeking a certain "tension" that he felt would be provided by three soloists; but there is quite enough tension already in his couples without turning them into ménages à trois. The second boy in *Concerto* served to deflect some of the intensity of the central couple's relationship; it was still New York City Ballet cool-blue. The new ballet is hot-orange, and there is no one else to whom either member of the couple can turn. They are stuck with each other in the peculiar Martins coupling: two physically strong, strong-minded, independent individuals engaged in continual combat yet passionately attached to each other.

The vision that Martins presents in these three ballets is very different from the one he was brought up on in the land of the Sylphide. Martins has been outspoken in his disapproval of contemporary Danish stagings of Bournonville's ballets. What New Yorkers find quaint and charming in the small doses to which they are exposed could well become cloying as a steady diet. There is a particular hypocrisy, of which Martins is no doubt aware, in the contrast between the Bournonville heroines—all averted glances and shyly granted pecks on the cheek—and the women who portray them. Discussing his partners in his memoirs, Martins writes: "They all possess in common those elements necessary to make a ballerina: they are all tough, merciless, self-centered, narrow-minded, and without awareness of and interest in the needs of her male counterpart."

Yet one senses an element of admiration in his assessment; Martins seems attracted by a certain toughness in ballerinas, as epitomized by Heather Watts, a thoroughly modern muse who fits into no traditional category. Her sexiness is based not on mysteriousness, as Suzanne Farrell's was, but on forthrightness. The entrance Martins gave Watts in *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos* couldn't be more straightforward: she walks—a real walk, heel to toe, not a ballet walk—in a straight line from a back wing to the center back of the stage, then makes a ninety-degree turn and continues walking to center stage. Watts has also put her distinctive stamp on many of the standard roles of the Balanchine repertory. When she dances the *Agon* pas de deux, it becomes a struggle that neither side wins but simply ends when both combatants are exhausted. *Bugaku,* a ritual seduction, in Watts's rendition becomes almost a rape.

For both Balanchine and Martins, art and love seem inextricably bound. To Balanchine, woman was Dulcinea, the elusive ideal. On the evidence of *Ecstatic Orange* and its progenitors, Martins sees her more as a sparring partner. Balanchine said that "ballet is woman." For Martins, it still is; but she's come a long way.

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Music

Schnabel *redivivus*

by Samuel Lipman

I suppose the compact disc, along with digital recording, its partner in computer-based wizardry, is here to stay. Once again the history of musical attitudes to developments in sound reproduction has followed its familiar pattern: initially resisted, new technologies first establish themselves on wider commercial grounds, and then win acceptance from music lovers, not because of the new art these technologies have brought in their van, but because of the old they have conserved in their wake. It was so with the primitive acoustic process at the turn of the century, which many thought would render music soulless but which then turned out to preserve a golden age of Italian and French operatic singing. It was so with electrical recording in the mid-1920s, which was accused by cultivated listeners of stridency and distortion but which served to document the golden age of German operatic and *Lieder* singing and the rise of the virtuoso conductor. It was so with the long-playing record at the end of the 1940s, which for many seemed thin-sounding and raised the specter of artificial performances assembled through the dubious miracle of tape-splicing; as now seems clear, the LP made possible a hitherto undreamt-of expansion in musical repertory and an enormous increase in our ability to hear great performers of the past who had been recorded on difficult-to-find 78 RPM discs.

And now, replacing all the old recording media, we have the digital compact disc. It is flashy and seductive like each new method of sound reproduction; its characteristic sound is brilliant and forward—but often also rough, screechy, and curiously insubstantial. It must be said, too, that most of what is coming out on these shiny, doughnut-shaped wafers (eerily reminiscent of the 45 RPM disc that was touted about 1950 by RCA as the answer to Columbia's introduction of the LP and then relegated to the world of the hit pop single) seems to be only a repackaging of familiar, wan "personalities" performing staples of the audience-pleasing repertory. There is no reason, after all, to expect the artistic contours of a composer or performer to be changed by the mere availability of a new reproducing technology, even if it is an improvement on what has come before.

But, as we are often told, technology, in that hazy world where science meets life, is value-neutral. Indeed, it may even bring benefits—including benefits to the life of the mind—where none was intended. And so it is with the compact disc, aided by digital re-mastering. Now, for a new, electronically up-to-date generation of music lovers, there are extraordinary performances available, often a half-century old and more, of some of the greatest music of our Western tradition.

Among the first performer-beneficiaries of this new lease on life is the pianist Artur Schnabel (1882-1951). Musically, Schnabel was an extraordinarily divided personality.

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He was a gifted composer of knotty but ultimately lyrical twelve-tone music, which he did not himself perform.[1] Vastly more important for his public reputation, he was the discoverer, for our time, of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas and five piano concertos, not as individual pieces but as an entire body of work; he also was the first pianist to play widely the last sonatas of Schubert (as well as the *Impromptus* and the *Moments musicaux*) and a generous selection of the most important Mozart concertos. His recordings of these works still set the musical standard for what are now seen, as the result of his efforts, as the cornerstones of the piano repertory. Originally made on 78 RPM discs in the 1930s and 1940s, almost all for HMV/EMI in London, these recordings were transferred to LP early on, both here and in England. In recent years many of them—including the Beethoven sonatas—have been re-transferred in improved sound, still using the LP format.

The first Schnabel compact discs, those of the Beethoven concertos, have now been issued here in the United States by Arabesque, under license from EMI in England.[2] They join no less than twelve other complete sets available today, made by ten pianists ranging from Claudio Arrau to Rudolf Serkin. Only the sets by Alfred Brendel (with James Levine and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) and Rudolf Serkin (with Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra) are at the present time available on compact disc. There are also single concerto performances, too numerous to count, by literally scores of pianists. I cannot pretend that I have heard all these recordings, but I have heard enough of them—including several new ones I will mention below—to feel certain of one thing: where the Beethoven concertos are concerned, despite formidable competition from such past pianists as Wilhelm Backhaus, Edwin Fischer, Walter Gieseking, and Solomon, Artur Schnabel remains *primus inter pares.*

The reviews of these Schnabel Beethoven records have been properly enthusiastic. They have stressed, correctly, the high seriousness of Schnabel's approach, and his ability to make a melodic line sing; they have praised the pianist's quasi-miraculous ability to find a way, through subtle inflections of dynamics, touch, and phrasing, to be expressive without sacrificing a basic regularity of pulse and tempo. The result of all these virtues is a projection of warmth with honesty, of feeling with discipline.

The critics have been unanimous, too, in pointing out how these discs miraculously resuscitate 78 RPM recordings dating back to 1932 (for the First and Fifth Concertos), 1933 (for the Third and Fourth), and 1935 (for the Second). There are experts who have said privately that the 78 RPM originals, heard on proper (and difficult to find) playback equipment, sound even better than these compact discs. Not possessing such sophisticated machinery, I can only say that the new transfers provide listening pleasure without any suggestion of the problems to be found on the primitive shellac records from which they have been taken. By comparison with the immediacy of these Schnabel compact discs, many of the new, up-to-the-minute, digitally recorded compact discs and LPs sound foggy and distant.

It is a pleasure to agree with all the critics, and in particular with William H. Youngren's thoughtful article on the Schnabel records in last October's *Atlantic.* But several points, having to do with the performances and with the role of these masterpieces in our musical life, seem to me to require a kind of attention they have not yet received.

The first point concerns just how marvelously well Artur Schnabel, on the evidence of these records, actually played the piano.

1 For a discussion of Schnabel's String Quartet No. 3 (1923), see my article "The LaSalle Quartet, and Pierre Boulez," in *The New Criterion,* April, 1986.

2 The First and Second Concertos are on Arabesque Z6549; the Third and the Fourth Concertos are on Z6550; the Fifth Concerto, along with the Polonaise in C major, op. 89, and the previously unreleased Andante in F major ("Andante Favori"), op. 170 (Grove), is on Z6551.

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I do not primarily mean his conception of the works, or even his *musical* execution of them. I mean rather what I suppose can only be called "technique," something the German piano teachers used to call *Fingerfertigkeit*; "digital dexterity" is perhaps a reasonable equivalent in English.

Every piano student knows, to his dismay, what the basic elements of this technique are: scales, arpeggios, trills, tremolos, double notes, and broken intervals—all of which must be played evenly, light and soft or loud and penetrating, and fast (upon demand) as the wind. And this is not enough to count as a great technique unless the pianist can convey, at the highest moments of stress, an impression of complete abandon and total joy. (Please bear in mind that I am not speaking here about musical penetration and projection, though the separation of these great goals from the technical means by which they are implemented is possible only for analytic purposes.) Put crudely, if you can laugh while your fingers are running all over the keyboard, you are a virtuoso; if you can't, you are a typewriter.

In listening to these Schnabel Beethoven records, time and again I had the feeling that the pianist was quietly burbling with pleasure as he shook the demanding passages out of his sleeve, as if all the notes were trump cards he had been saving for just the right moment. Schnabel has always been known for his wonderful quick and regular trill; on these records, perhaps because of the extraordinary reduction in surface noise and background hiss, his trill sounds like some transmogrified, super-refined doorbell. His scales at the end of the closing rondos in the First (C major) and the Third (C minor) Concertos are dazzling, easily showing up those of the highly regarded Martha Argerich (in the former) and both Vladimir Ashkenazy and Murray Perahia (in the latter). Equally dazzling is Schnabel's bravura close of the Fifth (E-flat major, the "Emperor") Concerto, which far surpasses a recent recording by Emanuel Ax. And Schnabel's lightness in passagework throughout the Second (B-flat major) Concerto—never feathery and always penetrating—simply defies comparison to the work of others.

It cannot be denied that Schnabel has been little regarded as a virtuoso. For his admirers, virtuosity has seemed a quality of piano-playing associated with what they see as the mindless exhibitionism of those pianists—usually Russian in origin or affinity—who specialize in display pieces, or in great works played as if they were display pieces. For his detractors, there have always been easy-to-find passages of dirty notes or rhythmic unsteadiness on his recordings; his 1935 recording of the Beethoven sonata opus 106 (the "Hammerklavier") is famous for many of these sloppy patches. But these Beethoven concerto recordings make clear that any such shortcomings were due to his indifference to digital niceties, perhaps including an unwillingness to practice a great deal, rather than to any lack in technical ability.

In these concerto recordings, one hardly knows how much of the overall impression of grace and ease is Schnabel's doing alone, and how much is owing to the contribution of his conductor on these records, Malcolm Sargent (1895-1967). Though late in life Sargent was popularly successful at home and abroad as Britain's "ambassador of music," and though he conducted the immensely important (for the building of an English audience for serious music) Robert Mayer Children's Concerts and the Courtauld-Sargent Concerts in the Twenties and Thirties, he never received respect as a creative musical performer. Indeed, even his close associates responded to him with a certain scorn: Charles Reid, in his 1968 biography of the conductor, recounts Sir Thomas Beecham's reaction when someone told him that the newspapers were carrying a (false) story about Sargent's having been ambushed during a 1937 tour of Palestine:

> "I never read the papers, my dear boy," [Beecham] drawled. "What happened?"
>
> "Malcolm was ambushed by the Arabs."
>
> Beecham stroked his beard. Then: "I never knew the Arabs were so fond of music."

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But on the evidence of these Schnabel Beethoven concerto records, Sargent was not just a first-class accompanist, in the sense of being able to follow the soloist under the demanding conditions of recording—though that ability was perhaps more highly prized when records were made in four-minute takes, without today's indispensable splices. Under Sargent's baton, the orchestra (or more accurately the orchestras, for the First and Fifth Concertos are with the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Second, Third, and Fourth are with the then newly founded, more dependable London Philharmonic Orchestra) always seems to be performing *con amore,* with luminous crispness and rhythmic energy. Each melody bursts with a sense of discovery, as if the conductor and the orchestra members at that moment felt there was nothing more important in the world to be doing than playing great music. By contrast, the performances of Beethoven's concertos by today's famous conductors and great orchestras usually sound lush, slick, and ultimately trivial.

As we try to understand how Malcolm Sargent was able to get such affecting playing out of such less-than-great orchestras, one factor in particular should not be overlooked. Sargent had grown up with the marvelous operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, and by the time he turned thirty he had conducted eighteen provincial productions of eleven of their works. In 1926 he began an association with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company in London, the sacred fount of Gilbert and Sullivan productions. From this period in Sargent's life we have several recordings[3] to show that Sargent brought to Gilbert and Sullivan the same songfulness, grace, and energy which marked his Beethoven concerto accompaniments.

It is fashionable today to talk in glowing terms about the "crossover" between serious and popular music. Now that we are inundated by a commercial music of the most vulgar kind, it is refreshing to remember a time—of which Gilbert and Sullivan, and Sargent, are symbols—when there was a fruitful relation between serious and popular culture, a time when wildly successful vernacular music was a partner, and not the enemy, of high culture.

The overriding reason for taking these Schnabel compact discs seriously is that they enshrine wonderful performances of masterpieces, and indeed are in some sense responsible for the very popularity of these masterpieces today. It is easy to feel that the Beethoven concertos, along with many other central works of the European musical tradition, are now overplayed, and that this overplaying is both crowding out worthy new works and dulling the sensitivity of the audience to the greatness they undoubtedly represent. But upon listening to these Schnabel discs—and upon listening to others, for example, the excellent new compact-disc transfer of the 1949 Arturo Toscanini recording of the Beethoven *Eroica* Symphony[4]—it seems clear to me that the problem is not how many times these great works are played, but *how* they are played.

When (as is the case today) masterworks receive superficially elegant, artificially correct, and basically colorless celebrity performances, they cast a pall over themselves and over all the pieces which surround them on concert programs. When these lackluster performances are advertised ("marketed" is perhaps the preferred euphemism) as revelations, the only result can be the becalmed and increasingly embittered state in which musical life now finds itself. For this situation only true greatness can provide a cure, and the Artur Schnabel Beethoven concerto discs provide music lovers a place to start.

3 Of the many early Sargent recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan (he made still others after World War II), I have heard, and can highly recommend, the 1929 *Pirates of Penzance* (Arabesque CD Z8068-2), the 1929 *Iolanthe* (Arabesque LP 8066-2L), the 1930 *H. M. S. Pinafore* (Arabesque LP 8052-2L), and the 1932 *Princess Ida* (Arabesque LP 8129-2L).

4 RCA RCD1-7197.

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Art

Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers

by Dan Hofstadter

Vincent van Gogh's last pictures—the huge body of work that he executed in the fifteen months before his death in July of 1890 at the age of thirty-seven—are mostly about spirituality, about spirit-power moving in the universe. A spiritual mood, I suppose, is one in which people fall to pondering the common lot of lives—birth, growth, maturation, death—and the ways in which these finalities may be imbued with sacramental meaning. Though to paint a head or a shoe or a cypress has never been considered a sacred act, Van Gogh in the presumed foreknowledge of his imminent death summoned up the will to sanctify in a way his métier. In the collective memory, too, he appears as a holy-man, a red-faced, straw-hatted evangelist with a rippling wheatfield behind him as pantheistic evidence of the Resurrection. Much of this is Hollywood, of course, but by no means all of it, for what gives his images their iconic aura is their genuine, simple prayerfulness. *Look,* he raptly tells us, *there are poppies growing in the orchard;* or, *This crooked lane goes just like this*—and he draws a line around it to stress his joyful wonder. There is in his famous letters to his brother Theo a pathetic sense of despair soliciting hope. Art, he perceives, is long, and life is short, he sees, and already his life is guttering out, like a candle on a straw-bottomed chair; it has somehow always been *too late* for him, too late even to grasp the truth of this orchard, these poppies, this lane—and yet, and yet . . . isn't there every reason to hope? Isn't everything, in the end, precisely as it was meant to be?

The Metropolitan Museum's current exhibition of Van Gogh's work from Saint-Rémy and Auvers follows, with a slight lapse of time, an earlier show of the painter's preceding period at Arles.[1] Both shows were curated by Ronald Pickvance, who also wrote the not-quite-matching catalogues, which are very intelligently put together and profusely illustrated. It is generally held that Van Gogh in Arles was a rather greater artist than Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers, and painful though it is to accept conventional wisdom, I too prefer the earlier period. In May, 1889, the severely troubled painter arrived in the Provençal village of Saint-Rémy, where he voluntarily committed himself to a mental asylum; thenceforward to July, 1890, when he took his life at Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, he seems to have been too agitated to sustain the creative power he had so abundantly manifested in Arles. The show at the Met was weakened as well by its inclusiveness: a very great deal of what Van Gogh produced during his final

1 "Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers" opened at the Metropolitan Museum on November 25 and is on view through March 22. It was organized by Ronald Pickvance, who also wrote the catalogue (published by the Metropolitan in association with Abrams, 325 pages, $18.95). "Van Gogh in Arles" was on view at the Metropolitan from October 18 to December 30, 1984.

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months was proudly put on display, and the artist's reputation cannot emerge unscathed from this warts-and-all presentation. Nonetheless, this body of work, with its many delicate inner correspondences, certainly deserved to be viewed at least once precisely as the Met presented it.

In Van Gogh's previous phase at Arles his characteristic stubble of blunt strokes had been put to as many uses as the staple of a peasant diet. Isolated, the strokes could stand for things like flowers or stalks; aligned, they could build planes; twisted around, they could delineate a head or a thatched roof; reduced to dots, they could indicate density or aerial perspective; running all together in skeins, they could point the way. But during the painter's first months at Saint-Rémy the strokes' configurations shift. They seem to rebel against being the mere constituents of things; they want a life of their own. It is as if the bricks in a wall were to mutter against their lowly estate and then to swarm like bees; and as the strokes in the pictures swarm along in their characteristic vivid wavelets they begin to remind us of other sorts of directional phenomena, like the braided ripples in brooks, or magnetized iron shavings. Often they scarcely represent matter or discrete objects at all, but rather the vectors of some fierce force field.

A sign of derangement? Decidedly not—Van Gogh's drawings and paintings never resemble those of a madman, for his way of picture-making was perfectly rational if somewhat overcharged. The state of spiritual fermentation in which he knocked these things out, though interspersed with episodes of the direst melancholy, was absolutely a factor in his favor. To glimpse in the unfolding pageant of nature some unifying flow, some strangely palpable prophecy that everything here is just as it must be—that is not merely a permissible part of representation but actually its prime occasion. The old Japanese draughtsmen whom Van Gogh so deeply admired used to speak candidly of something called *ki,* which was, I believe, the energy that flowed through any motif: if a man could not discern it in the whorls of a tree-bole or a dancer's sleeve then he had better not lift his brush—not, that is, till he saw it coursing in his subject. Yet if the Dutchman's bustling spirituality could only lighten his endeavors, he set himself something of a snare in his attempt to reconcile it with a certain quaint conception of pictorial simplicity. This notion, offering itself to his Christian conscience under the guise of humility, pressed him rather often to run a severe yet rustically irregular line around an object or a part of one. Such contours, which often undulate so vigorously that the scene seems glimpsed as in a pond or a blistered mirror, were derived from such nineteenth-century sources as Japanese prints, *images d'Epinal*, children's books, and illustrated papers—an essentially populistic pictorial trove. Presumably Van Gogh felt that with these dark lines he could achieve the stylistic propinquity to the great unwashed that had been his standing aim; at the same time they secured for his paintings some of the thrilling semi-abstract linearity of his reed-pen drawings. As it happens, to conjoin the populistic outlines with the swarming brushstrokes was by no means an impossible task; but it was not an easy task either.

A good many pictures in this exhibition ought by all rights to have belonged to the great and honorable fraternity of those canvases which are made, often at an early age, to stand in a corner with their faces to the wall. Van Gogh simply does not seem pledged at this period to a standard of pictorial construction. There is little sign, amid the many muddled or ill-articulated areas, that the painter was passionately committed to getting things right; his letters to Theo also disclose that he was not averse to sending on to Paris a painting of whose flaws he was wholly aware. What this suggests, of course, was that Van Gogh always remained something of an amateur, though only an amateur of genius could have painted the *Portrait of Trabuc.* It is the amateur, after all, who is obsessed with the "experience" of painting, who brings back a daub from the sunset saying, This is a part of me, this

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expresses my feelings. Unfortunately for such a hypothesis, though, there never was anything amateurish about the painting of Vincent van Gogh; one must search, then, for some better explanation for so much structural instability. Perhaps he feared that any bout of self-criticism would unleash a wave of morbid depression so violent that it might drag him under; perhaps something like this did actually happen in the end. The fact remains that some of these paintings don't look fully puzzled out.

Again and again one is brought up short by Van Gogh's difficulties in reconciling two very different conceptions of modernity. Édouard Manet before him had faced a similar problem: for Manet the truly modern technique had meant the registration of flat color values coming together, whereas the modern subject—put simply—was the passage of people in public places. The two could not be reconciled: the spectator may observe the resultant foundering in the background of some of the late pieces, where Manet was obliged to rely on memory for the entire setting, though no one alive could have remembered so manifold an array of tones. What happened to Van Gogh's attempt to fuse his perception of spiritual energy with his notion of modernism as something akin to populism was somewhat analogous. His many copies of Millet's *The Sower* propose the quandary: how can the essentially non-naturalistic flow of the brushstrokes adequately encompass the extremely material clods on which the sower—to be a sower—must stand? How can the color of the sky be intensified into a "halo" of emotion (Van Gogh's terminology) without falsifying both the experience of leaden northern skies and the mood of grueling farm labor? Progressively in the late paintings the sense of feelable structure —of where things are in relation to one another—is lost in woolly confusion or forfeited in favor of fairly flat color planes. Of the latter it must be said that when they work they really work, as in the superb *Olive Trees with the Alpilles* or *Mountains at Saint-Rémy*; but often they do not work at all.

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Nothing short of consistently brilliant seeing can marry heavy outlines to short, choppy brushstrokes. At Arles Van Gogh pulls off this feat, but at Saint-Rémy he wavers. His repetitive, heavy-handed impasto fails to make up for a certain lack of assurance in the design. Often there is some exoticism or lack of simplicity in his color; he nurses too many overheated ideas about things, he wants to paint their poetic nature instead of their placement in pictorial space. He loses the workman's, the craftsman's point of view—rather strangely, I think, for someone so ideologically attuned to the value of manual labor. In *Village Street in Auvers* he recaptures his brio, plays hide and seek with his contours, floats with consummate skill his delightful *chaumières* into their almost comically fluid and wobbly space; and all the while he deftly catches, in a color chord purloined from the Dutch flag, that popular, almost childlike note he has been wistfully seeking all along. It is like a shard of childhood recovered in a dream.

When, in Auvers, Van Gogh limited himself to line and a color or two, his drawing, always interesting and innovative, became . . . well, simply perfect. This is Van Gogh the spiritual authority, the man who drew spirit itself. The notion of Van Gogh the martyr of inwardness—the patron saint of the unrequited life—was given appropriately goofy expression some decades ago by Antonin Artaud in *Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société*; Artaud's notion has, I think, much truth to it. Unfortunately, however, it has been confused with another notion, which is that of Van Gogh the hero of temperament, who was also the hero of the German Expressionists. Many of the worst excesses of this school of painting and its contemporary heirs are traceable to an occasional practice of Van Gogh's that sets my teeth on edge: the exploitation of objects for their emotional associations rather than for their compositional or spatial value. This is the Vincent of the shimmying trees and glaring stars, the papery moons and gluey clouds—he of the dorm-room wall. But generally I try not to think of this truculent bore, and in fact I rarely do; for whenever I picture Vincent van Gogh, a seventy-year-old titan with a floating white beard rises up in my mind, and I strain to see all the wonderful pictures he is showing me—all the wonderful things he would have painted had he not made his Saint-Rémy and Auvers phase his last.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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On Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind" *by David Gress*

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Jottings along the way

by Jed Perl

In 1982, the sculptor Anne Truitt published *Daybook*, an informal account of her work and life during a period of seven years, from 1974 through 1980. Truitt, who's now sixty-six years old, described her marriage and her divorce, her three grown kids, her house in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., her money worries, teaching jobs, and days in the studio, where she makes the slender, luxuriantly colored, four-sided columns which have been exhibited at the André Emmerich Gallery in New York and in one-person shows at the Whitney Museum and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. To judge from *Daybook*, Truitt has led a more conventionally middle-class American life than most artists who have "serious" New York reputations; but then the interest of *Daybook*, which had a *succès d'estime* and meant something special to many artists, lies in Truitt's ability to show us just how strange and serendipitous a conjunction of bits and pieces an artist's life really is. Though Truitt's professional good fortune, much of which stems from the praise of Clement Greenberg, is more than most can ever hope for, her career *is* like many others—a combination of hard work, some deep kind of self-confidence, and a few interventions by the guardian angel.

Truitt has now published a second volume, *Turn*, which begins with her feelings upon the publication of *Daybook*.[1] In tone it's much like the first book, but the diary entries, which cover a period of about two and a half years, carry a heavier psychological freight, because Truitt's ex-husband, James, has committed suicide. Though they'd been apart for many years, and he'd remarried, the news leaves Truitt unable to work for over a year and sends her into an uneasy period of introspection. The suicide—which she finds totally inexplicable—forces Truitt to accept how little her present situation resembles that of the woman who married James and entered into what sounds like an intimate marriage, a kind of romantic meetings of minds, so cozy that it got stifling, until somebody had to break out for air. The divorces of Truitt's two daughters, mentioned here and there in *Turn*, echo her own shaken expectations, and Truitt begins to find herself frightened of her own limits—she experiences an anxiety attack while driving through a storm to pick up her son. But there's also a feeling of satisfaction in what she has—her solitude, which she finds she rather enjoys; her grown children and grandchildren, with whom she spends summer vacations and keeps up correspondence; and her work, which brings out into the open images she first sees in her mind's eye and provides a means of engagement with the world. At the beginning of *Turn*, when a bookshop in Georgetown gives a party for the publication of *Daybook*, Truitt describes seeing the copies of her book—

1 *Daybook* was published by Pantheon in 1982; *Turn* was published by Viking Press (256 pages, $16.95).

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> displayed in the front bay window to the right of the shop's narrow gray wooden doors, through which [my husband and I] used often to pass in the early days of our marriage. Perhaps it may have crossed James's mind then that he might one day see a book of his there (I wish he had), but never once did it cross mine that I would see one of my own.

In a way the whole book is about Truitt's acceptance of her own success in the wake of her ex-husband's—what to call suicide?—ultimate failure. By the end of her journal, Truitt is working again. She's come through something, and she's feeling pretty good.

Truitt has taken on the major task of transforming a life into an open book, and if a reader ends up feeling that he doesn't quite know who the author is, it's perhaps less a failure of the will than a failure of the prose. In *Turn* the writing often gets too choppy—there are too many flashes backward and forward, and what the reader gets isn't the flow of thoughts through a mind, but the coagulation of little bits on the page. Truitt will grab onto something great—and then just switch off. She remembers that

> when I was a child, I had to take a nap every afternoon and used to read surreptitiously the books exiled to the children's floor of our house in Easton, Maryland. One of these was a large edition, beautifully illustrated, of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The text was in French, which I could not read, but I pored over the pictures, most often over the one in which Gulliver is tied down by the six-inch-high Lilliputians while he is asleep: there lay the immense Gulliver rendered helpless by countless tiny lines pegged to the ground.

I was interested to know why Truitt recalls this picture so clearly, because I also remember an illustration of that episode in *Gulliver's Travels*. But instead of talking about the memory Truitt closes it off with some fancy metaphor about how "every work of my life attaches me to that life." This makes no sense, and feels like a bit of a cheat, since of course what really attracts a child to that picture is its peculiar sadism—the triumph of the little guys over the grown-up. I'm not saying Truitt is prudish or that she's withholding her deeper feelings; she does, though, have a rather mannered idea of what writing ought to be, and she strains after "literary" effects. When she comes to her trip to Europe—her first, at the age of sixty-four—she's on to a fascinating subject, and we want to know as much as possible about what kept her from Europe all those years. She gives us *some* information, and the line on first entering the Louvre *is* brilliant: "The Louvre rolled up a lifetime's study of art into a pellet and spat it out in my ignorant face." But she never homes in on what Europe means to her. It feels like just a minute between the time when she's preparing her house for the house-sitters and her return, with its serene sorting out of memories. The writing of these two books seems to be the controlled act of a very controlled woman, and there's an interest—an extra-literary interest, one might say—in one's sense of a personality exposing itself, sometimes almost in spite of the elegant turns of the prose.

Even if the two volumes aren't quite first-class literature, they're very special and you can't get them out of your mind. Truitt has managed to tell us what it feels like to be an artist in the 1980s, and artists are drawn to her books because a sculptor has written about what it means to work at the trade day by day, and hasn't gotten mired in the same old gossip about you-know-who, whose name begins with C or H or S. To Truitt those names obviously mean beans. Not that Truitt's unworldly! She wants to make it—she has made it—and she talks about it. She even takes legal action against the University of Maryland, where she teaches, because she's sick of being a woman who's the worst-paid professor in the department (we have a hunch that she's both the best teacher and the best-known artist among her colleagues). Truitt likes to be in her studio—she wants to give concrete form to those colors that float before her eyes—and, yes, she wants to have her work seen and understood.

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To celebrate the publication of *Turn*, André Emmerich mounted a small show in November of Truitt's sculpture in his ninth-floor gallery at 41 East Fifty-seventh Street. There was a bench where one could relax and watch these rectangles encased in skins of springtime pink and green, blood-thick red, dusky twilight blue, and other brilliant hues. The Persian-miniature-bright colors bring to mind the author, who often writes of color effects—of "the peach-colored blur of budding trees," or "blazing yellow maple leaves against an enamel-blue sky." The plywood columns are made by a carpenter, and then Truitt covers them with many coats of color, until each side shines hard and clear. There are basically two kinds of compositions. In one type each side is a different color, and the viewer is pulled around to experience the shifting hues. In the other type, there are stripes at top and bottom that run round the four sides, and draw one's eye to base and pinnacle, up and down. Truitt's sensibility connects with the extreme aestheticism of the color-field painters; but her forms, which are right-angled and severe, are more traditionally constructivist. (Her columns recall in many respects those of the Neoplastic painter Ilya Bolotowsky.) Truitt's sculpture, with its dazzle of colors, is about a hedonism that's subdued and contained. Her books are about what she's left out of the sculpture—the big etcetera which for an artist is living, day by day.

Jonathan Silver, whose sculpture was at the Gruenebaum Gallery in November and December, is another artist who from time to time takes up the pen—he's published articles on Giacometti and David Smith. Silver's subject is the human figure; but his work, which is in cast and modeled plaster, and in bronze cast from plaster, offers the figure disfigured—fragmented, broken, rearranged. Silver (who's forty-nine) wants to give us the sense of an intelligence that's at home in the riches of history and religion and myth. His art invokes figure types and compositions from Ancient Greece, Baroque Rome, and twentieth-century Paris. Among his subjects are Jesus, Eve, Diana, Venus, and the Sun King. Silver obviously sees himself as an artist who's drunk on the whole glorious past of European art, but his sculptures abuse images of decrepitude and collapse in order to throw a murky film over a tradition he really cannot grasp.

There's a long and honorable list of artists who take up the pose of the heroic figure weeping at the Grave of Art: a few good tears more can always be wrung from the Death of History or the End of Classicism. De Chirico sometimes catches the tone appropriate to a pallbearer for the ancient world, and at least one contemporary American painter, the absurdly little-known Alfred Russell, has twisted classical culture into a troubling contemporary dream. An artist, though, has to be up to the old forms before he can get away with taking them apart. He's got to give us a taste of the age-old perfection, show us what Greece and Rome *were* before he can excite our sympathies at what they no longer are. Silver's view of the past isn't specific enough to convey a genuine obsession. We can't really feel with him when he tries to convince us that he's experienced a loss, because his hacked-up forms look like little more than acts of random violence—an adolescent's rage.

The generally slender, vertical format of Silver's work, as well as the rumpled surfaces, are obviously meant to invoke Giacometti, but Silver, whose every piece is an elaborate quasi-historical flight of fancy, has missed the very essence of Giacometti, which is his simplicity. What are we to make of the missing breasts in *Even with Eve* and *Small Venus*? Are they mastectomies? Or the residue of some kind of existential crisis in the studio? Silver will attach an absolutely conventional face to a body that's splintered to shards, and we don't know which came first, the chicken or the egg. Why is *Sun King* covered with pustules and horrible growths? Why the faceless *Heads*? And why, oh why, *The Barbarian Killing his Wife and Himself*? Is it supposed to be a love poem to the Baroque? What it really looks like is a Judy Pfaff plastic job covered in gray plaster

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glop. Silver's show was full of ideas—some of his half-demolished sculptures looked like ideas that had turned against themselves—but he can't sustain anything, and he can't carry anything through. The show was a sketch for the greatest one-man show in history—a show that would include everything and that no artist in his right mind would attempt. It even had a room-sized environment, called the *Chapel of Alexander Severus,* which carried this classy quote from the *Scriptores Historicae Augustae:* "In the sanctuary of his lares he kept statues of the deified emperors and also of certain holy souls . . . Apollonius, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus . . . ." The *Chapel* was a gloomy room with olive-drab-smeared walls and a floor dusted with leaves and plaster muck. This was the artist's studio as pagan shrine. Only the incense was missing.

Louisa Matthiasdottir, who's seventy, has given about as much pleasure as any painter working today, and her 1980 show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery—with its brilliant Icelandic cityscapes, complex still lifes, and enigmatic self-portraits—remains for me one of the radiant memories from fifteen years of gallery-going. Matthiasdottir's big clean brushstrokes are the sort of thing one might expect from a brilliant student—they look that unpremeditated—but hers make space and color as no student's ever can, and there's an exhilarating shock in finding this most ingenuous of styles catapulted into paintings that aren't quite like anything you've seen before. Matthiasdottir has said that most of her paintings are done in one sitting. This is borne out in the freshness of the pictures, in their wonderfully unfussy surfaces. While Matthiasdottir's work has the glow of oil paint, her knack for thinking in terms of big simple areas recalls the old fresco masters, for whom painting was also a one-shot deal. There is, though, a danger in this uncomplicated way of handling paint. When Matthiasdottir doesn't go all the way—and in her show last December at the Schoelkopf Gallery she mostly didn't—the work can look perfunctory, thrown off too fast.

Much of the problem with the recent show may have stemmed from its being so heavily tipped toward paintings of sheep and other farm animals, which are Matthiasdottir's most likable, but not necessarily her most satisfying, works. There were so many paintings of sheep in those gentle green Icelandic hills of hers that you could almost have been counting sheep. There was less of a sense in this show of an intelligence contemplating many different subjects, and the relative flatness of the landscapes wasn't enough counterbalanced, as it has been in other years, by the full volumetric space of the still lifes—which are really landscapes on a table top—and of the self-portraits. Some of the major canvases—such as *Three Horses in Icelandic Landscape*—were too much a matter of sharply silhouetted forms. This painting looked like a series of pop-up pieces; it had no enfolding atmosphere, no weight.

In recent years Matthiasdottir, who's always had a strong following among a group of artists and critics, has gained something of a more public reputation for the Icelandic landscapes—they've become her signature. I have the uncomfortable feeling that the preponderance of animal paintings in Matthiasdottir's recent show was a bow to this new, paying public—and who can blame her, after all those years of respect and few sales? But Matthiasdottir ought to know that the audience that's always treasured her shows counts on her *variety.*

The painting that held me the longest was *Sheep and Red Roofs,* with its wide valley marked off at the front by a trio of small animals, and in the background by a range of hills. Here Matthiasdottir trades her modern love of the surface for a powerful recession into depth; the painting recalls Dutch masters such as Ruisdael and Hobbema in its panoramic effect. Matthiasdottir gives her glowing, banner-brilliant color a more subdued, tonal mood, and there's an interesting new sense of scale—the tiny animals are overwhelmed by all that space. When one looks at *Sheep and Red Roofs* from a distance of eight or ten feet—or from

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across the room—it's a complete success. But from close up, little things go wrong. The strokes of green and blue on the houses in the middle distance don't sit in space—they don't fit into the overall flow—they declare themselves too much as autonomous marks of the brush. You can't quite stay inside the painting, as you can in Matthiasdottir's best work. Passages keep slipping from their moorings and bobbing up to a surface that she's otherwise trying to disclaim.

Matthiasdottir's inability to bring off this super-deep space is probably due less to miscalculation than to a reluctance to let her painting go totally 3-D. (In her still lifes, where she's confronting a space that's in reality fairly shallow, she can fully model the forms without refuting that surface architecture she's learned from Cubism and abstract art.) For some years, Matthiasdottir has built naturalistic landscape effects from nearly abstract structures of color; now she's hovering on the edge of tonalism and depth.

Standing in front of Sigmar Polke's new abstract paintings (at Mary Boone in November)—with their curlicues and escutcheons floating on expanses of thinly poured or sponged paint—I found myself thinking of Miró, who was the first artist to mesh writing and painting into a style of flat, enigmatic signs. Miró's paintings are hymns to shallowness—and it's something of a miracle that this Spaniard, who died on Christmas Eve in 1983, squeezed a whole life of important art out of variations on this one deliciously decorative idea. Not surprisingly, when others take up Miró's method, the shallowness generally turns to emptiness. And yet artists keep being attracted to this shadow-play version of pictorial space, probably because it expresses so beautifully our feeling that we can't any longer sustain total illusions, that everything is running down and emptying out.

Polke, who as the German guru of the appropriationist and Neo-Expressionist movement led the world for several years in the piling up of ill-synchronized pictorial allusions, has now gone minimalist in these gray and brown and black compositions. The new abstractions take up a position at the exact point where Neo-Expressionism has thrown off its glamorous rags and turned fanatically pure. The critic John Zinsser recently commented in *The East Village Eye* that "The East Village, once the turf of Fun, is now home to no-Fun, the new abstractionist backlash." Polke has done no-Fun one better. Down in Soho he's shown how you can have your no-Fun and still have Fun.

Polke's curls are derived from decorative designs in Dürer's *Prayer Book of Maximilian I* (1515). Like Kiefer, he's invoking the German past—only Polke's motifs, which are isolated from their Renaissance context, are so purely ornamental as to look rather French rococo. Blown up into two- or three-foot-high enigmas suspended over fields of snowy white and gray, his lightweight images are beguiling in their shameless, empty elegance. The old-fashionedness of the curlicues is neatly undercut by the puzzling aura of the pictures as a whole, and by the ragged edges on some of the curls, which were obviously copied from slide projections of photo-mechanical reproductions. These are shallow paintings—and I sort of like their international-set-smart-ass soullessness. Why, then, do they go so completely sour after I've looked at them for a time? Cocteau once observed of Miró that he "is saved by his living line. He only has to draw a cross in order to crucify." Maybe the problem with Polke's abstraction is that those loops of his couldn't strangle a fly.

As I write, the *Times* has been carrying reports of the trial, in State Supreme Court in Manhattan, in which Christie's, the auction house, is being sued by Cristallina, an investment concern that consigned eight paintings for sale in 1981, seven of which didn't reach their reserves and thus went unsold. Works that don't sell at auction are generally hard to move afterward. It's as if they've lost their luster by being rejected in the auction room—and Cristallina was un-

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derstandably upset to take back most of its paintings. David Bathurst, the president of Christie's, ended up resigning over accusations that he lied about how many paintings actually sold—he told reporters three. Cristallina is claiming it was misled by Christie's as to what prices its pictures could make. Christie's is claiming that Cristallina knew just what it was getting into.

These days the auction business, with its wild prices and nonstop publicity, seems to be echoing the financial scene as a whole—that was at least what a lot of people felt about the auction action last fall, when a Jasper Johns went for 3.6 million dollars and a Mondrian for five. There was said to be a change in the atmosphere of the auction rooms—people were bidding who'd never bid before. They've got loads of money, no taste, and treat picture purchases like corporate takeovers. Art seems to be the latest victim of arbitrage. Capitalism is in one of its berserk moods—and classic pictures are getting bought and sold like stocks and bonds. There were even accusations of bad manners, because museums were being bid out of the competition. Tom Armstrong, the director of the Whitney, was peeved at being outbid for Rosenquist's *F-111* by Jeffrey Deitsch, a vice-president in Citicorp's art advisory service—though what the Whitney needed *F-111* for, God only knows.

Most interesting were the complaints of the old-time dealers. Heinz Berggruen, who buys and sells classic moderns, said, "It's insane. It's a hyped market, overplayed. There are a lot of people involved with fresh money who don't know what this is all about." People like Berggruen represent the best side of the post-World War II art establishment, the establishment that believed in modernism, canonized its values, and got rich off of it. They're squealing now because the standards they've lived by are in collapse, overrun by a new crop of buyers who don't give a hoot about the carefully worked out canons. Two million for a Rosenquist is a scandal not because most people will admit a Rosenquist isn't worth the canvas it's painted on, but because it places an incorrect value on the thing—a value, in other words, that's not supported by the opinions of the established critics. A Wall Street investor, Asher Edelman, was quoted as saying that the auctions are "a less pleasant place to be. But it's patronage. It creates an environment in which more art, and more good art, is created." This has to be the most postmodern remark ever made. How is buying works by dead artists or older works by living artists patronage? How is five million for a Mondrian patronage? If sales had been what moved Mondrian to paint, he'd never have put brush to canvas.

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Books

Rothward bound

by Donna Rifkind

The Counterlife, according to its jacket copy, is "a novel unlike any that Philip Roth has written before."[1] The book reads "like a triumph" to William Gass in *The New York Times Book Review*; the author is "a comic genius," writes Martin Amis in *The Atlantic*. Richard Locke's *Wall Street Journal* article claims Roth has "quite transcended himself"; interviews with the author are spilling out of the pages of *Vanity Fair, Elle,* and the galleys of a new essay collection to be entitled *Reading Philip Roth*; the publisher has pronounced the book "a best-seller before publication date." Fanfare, limelight, jubilee—despite promises that *The Counterlife* is not only new but improved, even unprecedented, all the signals from publicity headquarters look comfortably like those of every previous launch since *Portnoy's Complaint*.

The new novel itself has plenty of familiar components. Roth's humor and intelligence, and his gift for imitating speech rhythms, are in evidence. So, inevitably, is Nathan Zuckerman, the famous Jewish writer of a book similar to *Portnoy* but who is not, we have been told sternly again and again, to be confused with Philip Roth. And there is Henry, Nathan's dentist brother in New Jersey, and various relatives who had appeared in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and who then went into reruns with the publication in 1985 of all three novels together with an epilogue, *The Prague Orgy*, in a volume entitled *Zuckerman Bound*.

For Philip Roth, the more things stay the same, the more they change. In an interview published in *The New York Times,* he maintains: "We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality, and are the closest thing we have to the truth." It is by now obvious that, just as hapless readers are inclined to equate Nathan Zuckerman with Philip Roth, so does Roth tend to assume that "we" are just exactly as obsessed with writing fiction as he is; but no matter.

The Counterlife takes as its premise this notion that life is unpredictable and everybody's assumptions about life are more so, that people are always thinking about changing their lives, inventing ways of "counterliving." From this Roth has designed a structure that is more accurately an anti-structure: each episode is followed by another that undermines the previous ones, so that any situation the narrative provides, once duly digested by the reader, is then subject to doubt. The novel begins with Henry Zuckerman, the suburban dentist and family man, who is impotent as a result of the medication he must take to control his heart disease. Henry is burdened by memories of a past affair with a Swiss-German blonde

1 *The Counterlife*, by Philip Roth; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 324 pages, $18.95.

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named Maria, and by the futility of a current infatuation with his young dental assistant, Wendy, and so he decides to undergo a bypass operation that may cure his impotence and may kill him. It kills him. At his funeral, his brother Nathan remembers that Henry had once speculated that his heart disease resulted from the strain of ending the affair with Maria, which dissolved because she was a shiksa and he a Jew: "If Henry had been right about the origins of his disease, if it did indeed result from the stress of that onerous defeat and those arduous feelings of self-contempt that dogged him long after her return to Basel, then, curiously enough, it was being a Jew that killed him."

More curiously, however, it is "being a Jew" that also resurrects Henry, for in the next chapter, "Judea," the book begins again: Henry has survived the operation and moved to Israel, determined to give his empty life significance by joining the collective cause to protect the Jewish state. Nathan flies off after Henry (who now insists on being called Hanoch) to try to convince his brother to go back to his shocked family. What follows is a prolonged—and impressive—discussion about the differences in the emotional and intellectual experiences of Israeli and American Jews, as Nathan spends three weeks travelling "through a Jewish homeland that couldn't have seemed to me more remote."

In Tel Aviv Nathan meets and talks with an old friend, Shuki Elchanan, who had been press attaché to David Ben Gurion and who now teaches and writes about what Israel has come to mean both as an ideal to American Jews and as a complex, conflict-torn reality to Israelis. "'The fact remains,'" he tells Nathan, "'that in the Diaspora a Jew like you lives securely, without real fear of persecution or violence, while we are living just the kind of imperilled Jewish existence that we came here to replace.'" American Jews, he says, need to see certain symbolic features when they come to Israel: "'the beards to remind them of saintly Yiddish weakness and the guns to reassure them of heroic Hebrew force . . . . out of them flows every sentimental emotion that wish fulfillment can produce.'" Shuki detests Israeli terrorists' insistence on force, condemning them as fascists: "'The situation gets so complicated that it seems to require a simple solution . . . . [the terrorist's] racket is to play upon Jewish insecurity—he says to the Jews, "I have the solution to our problem of fear."'"

Nathan gets a fusillade of alternative opinions from Mordecai Lippman, an Arab-hating guerrilla living in the hills on the West Bank who has made a disciple of Henry/Hanoch, and who is full of contempt for Israelis like Elchanan: "'We have weak people here, soft people here, who like to call their cowardice Jewish morality. Well, only let them practice their Jewish morality and it will lead to their destruction.'" Hanoch himself, caught up in the kind of zealotry unique to the newly converted, is nevertheless at least as lucid as Nathan (who is at least as lucid as Philip Roth, but we must be careful not to confuse them) in his recognition that "it's the sheer *perversity* of these conversions that is their transforming power." Nathan challenges Hanoch's decision to join Lippman's anti-Arab campaign, appalled at the nonchalance with which his brother handles a gun, and Hanoch in turn accuses Nathan of having "'one large defect—the only world that exists for you is the world of psychology. That's your revolver. Aim and fire—and you've been firing it at me all my life.'" After this episode, Nathan marvels at the number and force of the disputes he has witnessed and participated in since arriving in Israel: ". . . never in my life had I felt so enclosed by a world so contentious, where the argument is enormous and constant and everything turns out to be pro or con, positions taken, positions argued, and everything italicized by indignation and rage."

Arguments, indignation, rage—these are the staples of every Roth novel, and it is no surprise that the best writing in *The Counterlife* appears in the "Judea" chapter, where Roth is able to compare his private resent-

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ments with those of an entire country. As usual, however, no conflicts are resolved, and Nathan on a return flight to London writes to Hanoch, meditating on the patterns their interweaving lives have followed: Hanoch has adopted Nathan's former restlessness, succumbing to the "terrifying power" of Lippman's energy and imagination, and Nathan longs for the old Henry's family security. After a jarring, out-of-context scene in which a deranged American boy tries to hijack the airplane, convinced he must carry out some kind of confused messianic mission, the section abruptly ends.

Or try this: in the next part, "Gloucestershire," yet another plot takes over, and the reader's attention is pulled away from Hanoch and Israel toward Nathan and England. Now it is Nathan who is impotent, and in love with an Englishwoman named Maria: "My carnality is now *really* a fiction," he laments, "and, revenge of revenge, language and only language must provide the means for the release of everything." He has also decided he wants to be a father, because, as Maria reminds him, he cannot. And now it is Nathan who elects to have the dangerous operation, and Nathan who dies. The section proceeds into a series of Henry's thoughts about Nathan. Henry has stayed in New Jersey after all, and is full of resentment for his brother's unabashed, unflattering descriptions of him in the novel Nathan has left unfinished (whose first chapter is called "Basel," as *The Counterlife*'s is). By now the reader's head is spinning with these associations, and he is getting tired of figuring out if Nathan or Henry is alive or dead, so it is fortunate that not very much happens at this point: characters stop dying for a moment so that a lot of discussion can take place about which characters are real and which are made up by other characters. In the final chapter, "Christendom," Nathan is alive, feeling fine, living in London, and married to Maria, who is pregnant with his first child. They go off to meet Maria's shabby-genteel mother and sisters, encounter an anti-Semitic madwoman in a restaurant, have an argument about Nathan's Jewishness (his "psychosemitic ailment"), and the book, because it now really has run out of pages, is finished.

In the *New York Times* interview in which Roth was asked to comment on the structure of *The Counterlife,* he responded: "Normally there is a contract between the author and the reader that only gets torn up at the end of the book . . . . In this book the contract gets torn up at the end of each chapter . . . . Because one's original reading is always being challenged and the book progressively undermines its own fictional assumptions, the reader is always cannibalizing his own reactions." As Roth himself admits, there is certainly nothing avant-garde about this technique. The time-honored game of directing readers away from the alleged truth of a narrative toward the fact that it is a fiction does indeed involve such a "contract." But authors who have played this game most successfully, from Laurence Sterne to Vladimir Nabokov, have honored a deeper contract than the one that is tied merely to the structure of their books: somehow, even while acknowledging that the reality they dare readers to believe in is an illusion, they manage to go beyond the tissue of language, underneath the film of imitation, to tell us something more important about our lives than that uncertainty and change are inevitable.

In book after book, and especially in *The Counterlife,* Philip Roth has proved himself unwilling to honor that second contract. His fiction is a mirror that reflects little except himself (stern indictments about confusing him with his characters notwithstanding). The premise of *there are no rules* in this new novel is itself a rule, imposed by Roth; it is an imposition of structure for the sake of structure, with no content allowed to exist for long within it, and it is only one of a number of examples of the author's refusal to grant his readers any imaginative participation in the lives of these characters-in-progress. Nathan and Henry will die if and when Roth chooses to kill them, and to hell with what readers think. Whatever pleasure

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there was to be found in the thoughtful discussions in the "Judea" section is therefore taken away in the next chapter, when the reader is told that the episode never happened. This contempt for readers, for critics—for just about anyone who is not Philip Roth—is by this time famous, and it comes out in particularly defensive ways in this book. Maria tells Nathan in a letter, "'You may have had your fill of fighting Jews and fighting fathers and fighting literary inquisitors—the harder you fight that sort of local opposition, the more your inner conflict grows.'" She continues, "'The last thing you want is to make readers happy, with everything cozy and strifeless, and desire simply fulfilled.'" It never seems to occur to Roth that readers want not so much to be made happy as simply to feel that they are involved in a partnership with the author, in an agreement that one will tell a story and the other will listen, and that both parties must offer something to the equation for it to be successful. By taking characters away as fast as he introduces them for no reason other than to prove he has the power to do it, Roth makes sure the equation does not succeed.

If Roth were not so intelligent, his refusal consistently to engage the reader would emerge definitively as the spitefulness that it is, but he manages to cover his contempt with all sorts of elaborate, and sometimes funny, techniques: the insistence that Zuckerman and Roth are distinct personalities, for example, so that Zuckerman can get away with saying things that, coming from the author, would be unacceptable; or the way he has of mocking his own obnoxious assertions, or of anticipating criticism and ridiculing it himself before anyone else has the chance.

Despite Roth's use of devices that divert the reader, it is finally his lack of generosity, his inability to engage, that causes the best parts of *The Counterlife* to be absorbed and canceled out by the worst, most angry and contemptuous parts. Roth claims that it is the reader who is "cannibalizing his own reactions" in the process of reading the novel, but the reader is not granted even this base level of participation. In the end, when the pop-up figures have stopped dying and springing to life, when there are no more fictions to be undermined by other fictions, the reader is left with very little; the strongest, most lasting impression is of Philip Roth, laughing meanly and daring us to argue with him. Once again he has showed himself to be a magician sawing an empty box in two.

Indi(c)ting Bernard Berenson

Colin Simpson Artful Partners—Bernard Berenson and Joseph Duveen. Macmillan, 320 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Michael M. Thomas

Like most gossip, Colin Simpson's *Artful Partners* is at first blush fascinating. Like most gossip, however, it does not stand scrutiny well. It presents its information in a manner which precludes verification of its accuracy. In the final analysis, its sole meaningful accomplishment may be to earn momentary talk-show notoriety for Mr. Simpson.

One would have thought the dead Berensonian horse had been beaten beyond resurrection. And indeed so it might have been, had not circumstances given Mr. Simpson, a journalist with a record of remasticating well-chewed material (the Lusitania sinking; Lady Hamilton; Lawrence of Arabia; and the like), a crack at the files of Duveen Brothers (on embargoed deposit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) in the course of ghosting the late Edward Fowles's *Memories of Duveen Brothers* (Times Books, 1976). In the course of several visits to the Duveen archives, Simpson seems to have come across a number of letters and memoranda of a type which an opportunistic journalist would immediately recognize as grist for the scandal mill. Hence this book, which arrives

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swaddled in misleading hyperbole—for instance, "The Berenson Scandals" in *Connoisseur* (October, 1986). Indeed, the very fact of the *Connoisseur* interview is cause for more regret than anything in Simpson's book, since it is another sad example of Thomas Hoving's continued indulgence in his taste for sensation—a yearning which has compromised, if not utterly crippled, one of the most extraordinary art-historical talents of our generation.

The implication is that Simpson has uncovered something new and titillatingly evil about Berenson and his connections with the art trade. This is not so. It has been known—and generally deplored—for some forty years that Bernard Berenson was actively involved with art dealing, both as a principal and as an "expert," from around the turn of the century to 1938. Berenson himself did a little *mea culpa* chest-beating in his autobiographical *Sketch for a Self-Portrait,* decrying the need to practice a trade and self-importantly comparing himself to St. Paul and Spinoza. I can still hear in my mind's ear the heavily accented gusto with which my late mentor, the noted art dealer Rudolf J. Heinemann, used to recount an exchange during his first (and only) visit to Berenson's home. B.B.: "And what do you do, Dr. Heinemann?" R.J.H.: "I'm an art dealer, Mr. Berenson. Just like yourself." Finally, the catalogue to an essentially hagiographic exhibition ("Berenson and the Connoisseurship of Italian Painting") mounted in 1979 at the National Gallery put the matter plainly enough: "Berenson was, in fact, the last great representative of a type, the connoisseur-dealer."

It was the publication in 1952 of the late S. N. Behrman's *Duveen* that first made broadly public the association between Berenson and the outrageous art dealer Joseph Duveen. It was a collaboration of which few outside the professional art world were aware, and about which fewer still could have cared. Behrman's amusing biography-memoir (these after all were the days when *New Yorker* features still had a light touch), on which Behrman himself would subsequently base a singularly unamusing drawing-room comedy (*Lord Pengo,* starring Charles Boyer, which opened on Broadway on November 19, 1962), forever linked the names of Berenson and Duveen in the public eye.

Duveen was by then long dead. His memory was not celebrated at I Tatti, the villa which the fees Duveen paid Berenson for "certifying" Italian paintings had purchased. On my own first visit to Settignano, in 1956 (Berenson was then ninety), I launched a long career of faux pas by mentioning the dreaded "D-word" to Nicky Mariano, Berenson's mistress-at-arms, whom my companion and I were giving a lift down to Florence. The atmosphere inside the car grew suddenly still and glacial.

Simpson's version of the origins of the Behrman book fairly concisely illustrates the sort of "spin" he puts on most of the episodes central to his own. It was openly acknowledged by Behrman that his work was based on a never-published (and by all accounts unpublishable) memoir by Louis Levy, the long-time New York attorney for Duveen Brothers. Here is how Simpson puts it: "Levy's original manuscript, which I have read, was a spiteful personal apologia . . . . He took it to Behrman, who attended the same synagogue, for advice."

How are we to square this with Behrman's own account (in *People in a Day: A Memoir,* 1972): "I was [in Palm Springs] as the guest of . . . an executive of Columbia Films. He introduced me to a friend who had written a book on Lord Duveen which he had been unable to get published. When I read it I saw why. It was a marmoreal panegyric on the late lord and his clients. They were all Franciscan characters, living for Art and Others." The Behrman reading of Levy's account has been confirmed by others, notably by the late Belle Greene, Morgan's librarian and Berenson's sometime lover.

The gist of Simpson's book is that Berenson, on his own and in combination with a number of dealers, of whom Duveen was the most notable and highly remunerating, spent a good part of his life mulcting American millionaires. How? The catalogue of

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sins and evil practices set forth by Simpson includes overcharging, playing both sides of the table, smuggling, consorting with forgers, and, most notably of course, furnishing —for pay—attributions ranging from the optimistic to the knowingly deceitful. This is tasty stuff, reeking as it does of malefaction, especially at a time when once again popular interest in works of art appears to be solely a function of the price the new crop of centimillionaires will pay in the auction room.

Simpson's bottom line is to suggest that Berenson was a crook. Was he? Unfortunately, as is generally the case when a specialized or recondite activity is served up by the ignorant for the benefit of the unknowing, the first and most grievous casualties are likely to be the shades of meaning which add as much to the truth as facts, especially with respect to an era and personalities whose standards were hugely different from our own.

In such cases, the truth lies in the specifics; to deal with all of these in Mr. Simpson's case would require far more space than is available here. In seeking to discredit Berenson, Simpson seldom attacks frontally; he invariably prefers to skate on the somewhat safer ice of innuendo. Here is a typical example: writing of a *Coronation of the Virgin* in the Jules S. Bache Collection (Metropolitan Museum 49.7.4), Simpson states: "It was sold to Bache, always a lover of titles, as the property of Prince Charles von Lichnowsky of Kuchelna Castle in Eastern Prussia." The "as" suggests that Bache may have been duped as to the provenance of the painting, but there is nothing in the Metropolitan's 1971 catalogue of Florentine paintings to suggest anything of the sort.

In reference to the same picture, Simpson says that the Metropolitan lists the picture "as by a 'follower of the artist' who probably never worked in Botticelli's workshop and 'in remarkably bad condition' with 'substantial losses of paint and repeated and clumsy restorations.'" The Metropolitan's 1971 catalogue in fact says: ". . . The painting is in an extremely poor state of preservation, and many areas . . . have suffered losses of pigment and repeated restorations." One wonders why Simpson does not quote the Metropolitan catalogue exactly; his substitution of "clumsy restoration" and "remarkably bad condition" for the Met's milder phrasing is clearly designed to prejudice the reader. The fact that Simpson does this, together with his refusal to quote sources for his pejorative anecdotes, has to create serious doubts as to the scruples underlying his work. One might call such differentiations nit-picking, but in matters of scholarship, or when it comes to impugning a reputation, God—to paraphrase Mies van der Rohe—is in the nits.

In a way, it is too bad that Simpson's tone, method, and use of his material so entirely discredits his book. To see Berenson and the art world of his era plain, it is necessary to play a judgmental spotlight over certain dark corners of his life without descending into dubious scandal-mongering of the Simpson variety. Indeed, this is the only cavil I have with Professor Ernest Samuels's great biography, of which the second volume (*Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend*) is shortly to be published by Harvard. This is, I believe, one of the magisterial biographies of our time, comprehensive, scrupulous, thoughtful. It portrays both the man and his era generally fairly, I think. It is, however, in the end unevaluative, which is understandable, given the highly colored accounts of Berenson that preceded Samuels's (Sylvia Sprigge, *Berenson,* 1961; Nicky Mariano, *Forty Years with Berenson,* 1966; Meryle Secrest, *Being Bernard Berenson,* 1979). Nevertheless, there was (and remains) something about Berenson, about how he lived and operated, upon which our own era seems to demand judgment.

The publication within months of each other of a shallow piece of unsubstantiated character assassination and a full-scale but very neutral biography in the grand manner suggests that we are getting close to the point at which the last word on Bernard Berenson has got to have been said. Art history, scholarship, and connoisseurship have

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better things to do than to continue to go back and forth on the effect of Berenson's indisputable cupidity on the authority and accuracy of his attributions. The sheer awfulness of Simpson's book should be argument enough that this particular subject has now been exhausted in moral terms.

Berenson, whom a friend of mine aptly described as "the Henry Kissinger of the art world," was not the first splendidly gifted but impoverished moth to fly too near the seductive flame of wealth. He knew what poisonous and destructive influences and company the rich could be, and yet he wanted money. Having caught the virus of expensive tastes, he did what any young man in his position would do: he exploited his own talents and he curried favor with the rich in order to get some money for himself.

How bent did this make him? That's the question, and the answer I think is: much less than his detractors would like; a shade more than his adherents and acolytes would prefer to admit. His "lists" have stood the test of time remarkably well. He was in the game for some seventy years, and over four fifths of his attributions still stand, have weathered every wave of scholarly revision, every attempt—and there have been many—to show the old boy up. Apart from a concentrated flurry of optimistic attributing in 1912, understandable (if unforgivable) as a maiden effort to please his new employer Duveen, Berenson's record is remarkably clean. He was doing nothing unusual for his time, don't forget. All the great connoisseurs of that era—Gustav Gluck, Max Friedlaender, Hermann Voss—had a regular sideline in authentication. The difference, however, and I believe this to be critical in understanding the reaction Berenson arouses, was that in their case the piddling sums they received for yea-saying paid for little more than bread on the table, while Berenson's arrangements, beginning with his commission as Isabella Stewart Gardner's agent/scout and finishing with twenty-five years as Duveen Brothers' house expert, provided a *luxe* Florentine estate to which the world's rich and famous came worshipfully calling.

Scholars are not supposed to live this way. Trade tainted Berenson, it has been claimed again and again, notably by the late Sir Kenneth Clark, who could afford to be lofty and dismissive about money-grubbing, having inherited *his* millions. In 1961, on the occasion of the publication of Sylvia Sprigge's biography, Meyer Schapiro set his formidable intellect to the task of demolishing the temple. In an article called "Mr. Berenson's Values" (*Encounter,* January, 1961, oddly cited by neither Simpson nor Samuels), Schapiro wrote up one side and down the other of the matter, fingering and finding fault with everything from Berenson's art history to his Jewishness. Much of what Schapiro says is on the mark, yet the force of his argument is diminished by an obvious, envious, unconcealable rage seemingly arising from a belief that Berenson had somehow gotten away with something. But had he? Apart from a few million dollars and the adulation of society, I think not. For all its posturing, I accept the torment expressed in Berenson's autobiography and his published journals as genuine; I think that every time Berenson looked in his mirror, which was not infrequently, he knew exactly the sort of man who looked back at him. But he wanted the money.

I doubt that anyone reads Berenson any more. His brand of aesthetics and art history and connoisseurship (in particular his indifference—by today's standards scandalous—to condition and restoration) has long since been overwhelmed by other approaches. The books which made his reputation, the four little volumes (with lists) which constitute *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance,* today read like a combination of Pater and *Patience.* Berenson was a period piece, "a quintessential relic of the world before 1914," as Roger Hinks described I Tatti in his diaries. And not always a charming period piece, either, this vain, waspish, gossipy, insecure little man who often seemed as preoccupied with tailoring as with Tintoretto.

And yet, and yet . . . we cannot escape his legacy.

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Which is where in the end it counts, in what is up there on the walls of the Gardner Museum, of the Metropolitan, of the National Gallery. Take away the Berenson-Duveen "contributions" and those noble galleries would be decimated. Berenson and Duveen may have been knaves, but would there be a Frick Collection without them, and which would you rather have? It would seem that Berenson's posterity disproves Marc Antony's assertion as to which part of a man is interred with his bones. That this should be understandably makes academic purists wail and rend their garments, and invites mean-spirited, scandal-baiting cheap shots like this book of Simpson's. It will however all come to nothing in the end, for what's done is done, and let us now for Heaven's sake put this matter to rest, and simply stand back and enjoy the paintings.

Architecture redux

Ada Louise Huxtable Architecture, Anyone? Cautionary Tales of the Building Art. Random House, 345 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Roger Kimball

In *Architecture, Anyone?*, Ada Louise Huxtable has drawn together some sixty articles from the last five years of her tenure as chief architecture critic for *The New York Times.* While Mrs. Huxtable has taken the opportunity to "expand, clarify, and update" the articles—adding introductory or concluding notes, registering the outcome of particular controversies and movements—she has endeavored to preserve her original critical judgments intact. Dated from the beginning of 1977 through the end of 1981, the articles in *Architecture, Anyone?* may thus be read in part as a contemporary record of one critic's response to the bewildering urban architectural scene that witnessed the eclipse of modernism, the flowering of postmodernism and the preservation movement, and a spasm of urban building and over-building that only now shows signs of abating.

The subject mattter of such a critical miscellany is dictated to a large extent by the particulars of the critic's architectural milieu, the buildings and projects that captured the public's attention at a given moment, the exhibitions and publications that provided apt occasions for a review. Thus the book cannot hope to provide a comprehensive overview of the architectural life of its times. All the same, Mrs. Huxtable has managed to touch upon most of the major controversies, and to sketch most of the main characters, in the drama of contemporary architecture. Her book includes articles on individual figures from Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Wallace Harrison, and the town planner Clarence Stein to contemporary practitioners like Aldo Rossi, Leon Krier, James Stirling, John Hejduk, Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, and Richard Meier. She reviews a number of individual buildings and monuments, notably some recent museum buildings, including I. M. Pei's new wing for The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and Cesar Pelli's major renovation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The book also provides a handful of historical reflections on such topics as the legacy of Viollet-le-Duc, the firm of McKim, Mead and White, and the all-but-forgotten Russian Constructivist architect Ivan Leonidov. Since city planning is among Mrs. Huxtable's great passions, one is not surprised to discover that *Architecture, Anyone?* features some dozen pieces on the arrangements—occasionally wise, often foolish—that planners, architects, developers, and politicians have made to dispose of the cities and neighborhoods under their authority. Most of the articles in this section deal with New York issues— the evolution of its zoning practices, the protracted and often acrimonious disputations over the fate of Grand Central Terminal, St. Bartholomew's Church, Westway, Battery Park City, and the South Bronx—but there are also pieces on developments in Boston, London, Dublin, Paris, and West Berlin. The volume concludes with several more or less occasional pieces

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on sundry topics, from landscape architecture and the reception of modern American architecture abroad to architectural "clutter" and the design of contemporary waiting rooms.

As bespeaks their provenance, most of the articles in *Architecture, Anyone?* are brief, twelve-hundred- to fifteen-hundred-word productions written in response to specific architectural events; the few longer entries—a piece on architectural drawings, for example, near the end of the volume—are stitched together from multiple installments of these shorter reflections. Such brevity naturally imposes rather severe limits on the depth with which a given topic can be pursued. But Mrs. Huxtable has effectively perfected the form. She is able to illuminate the particulars of her subject in a page or so and then proceed to place it neatly in the context of the larger urban or aesthetic issues it raises. It is a testimony to her mastery—and also to her skill in selecting and arranging the contents of the present volume—that one seldom feels that one is simply watching a series of critical snapshots, as it were. Although the volume does not present a continuous narrative, the individual pieces bear witness to a coherent set of assumptions about the tasks of contemporary architecture and architectural criticism.

One recurrent theme in *Architecture, Anyone?* is the fate of modernist architecture. Indeed, Mrs. Huxtable is probably at her best when defending modernist classics that have been unfairly maligned, or when criticizing the flights of historicizing pretense that typify most exercises in postmodernism, though one might well feel that she is at times too timid or generous in her characterizations of her opponents. For example, does she really believe that Peter Eisenman's *Oppositions* was an "excellent" magazine? Nothing else she writes about the sensibility it represented suggests she does. Does she really consider Leon Krier's "combination of art and nostalgia" "enviable"? Her subsequent criticisms suggest otherwise. Yet by and large *Architecture, Anyone?* reveals Mrs. Huxtable as an outspoken and discerning critic who is not afraid of taking unpopular stands. Perhaps her chief critical asset is a thorough grounding in nineteenth- and twentieth-century architectural history, a grounding that gave her 1983 monograph, *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered*, an authority rare in the pages of contemporary architectural criticism. Mrs. Huxtable's habit of patient scholarship helps her both to appreciate genuine innovation and historical continuity where it occurs and to recognize the bogus, fraudulent, and superficial imitations of these virtues.

A superb example of the former is her 1981 essay "Reappraisal at Pessac," in which she describes her visit to the town near Bordeaux to see Le Corbusier's notorious 1926 housing project, Quartiers Modernes Frugès. The project has been consistently attacked since 1929 when the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock wrote that it was a "serious disappointment." As Mrs. Huxtable notes, this judgment has been amplified over the years, until Pessac came to embody everything that was supposedly wrong with the modern movement: its abstractness, its unlivable purity and uniformity, its "elitest" imposition of architectural ideas on unwilling occupants. That many inhabitants of the project should go so far as to remodel their houses, tearing down walls, building out into gardens, was taken as the ultimate confirmation of Pessac's failure. It takes considerable critical independence to dissent from such inherited opinion, and Mrs. Huxtable does it with grace and conviction.

> And so I walked down the Avenue Frugès and Rue Le Corbusier in Pessac on a late January day expecting the shock of the old, or the future that died, but the script didn't fit . . . .
>
> The scale and relationship of the houses to one another and to the gardens are excellent; the shapes and proportions of the buildings are still strong and good. There is a feeling of a cohesive whole. Even with the loss of key elements of the "pure" Corbusian style—the precise repetition of open and closed geometries,

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> the visual sense of a thin membrane, the painterly abstraction of the original colored facades—Pessac retains an impressive and recognizable integrity. This is a very pleasant place to be. And the houses are clearly survivors.
>
> It is also clear that Pessac is a survivor precisely because of its architecture. Its strong identity absorbs almost anything time and residents can inflict . . . . Pessac continues to give something to the eye and the spirit that only buildings shaped and informed by a superior and caring eye and spirit can. This still holds true, with all the changes made by the occupants over the years.

And on the whole question of the inhabitants making changes to the houses, Mrs. Huxtable is surely right when she writes that the householder does not exist "who has not revised, revamped, expanded, or added a little class or space to his home in dream or actuality." Quoting one of the project's few earlier champions, she even suggests that "the modifications carried out by the occupants constitute a positive and not a negative consequence of Le Corbusier's original conception. Pessac not only allowed the occupants sufficient latitude to satisfy their needs, by so doing it also helped them to realize what those needs were."

The more critical side of *Architecture, Anyone?* shows itself most trenchantly in those essays where Mrs. Huxtable confronts the dubious historicizing efforts of postmodernism. In "The Past as Future," for example, she discusses the widespread attempt to revive classical architectural forms in what is still an essentially modernist environment. If in the Fifties and Sixties many buildings were insensitively "modernized" by the addition of a stock "modernist" façade—"Kawneered and Johns-Manvilled to extinction," as she puts it—now modern buildings are "restored" or "traditionalized" by the addition of an equally contrived bit of architectural ornamentation. In this context she cites a remodeled supermarket in Manchester, Connecticut, where we find a standard-issue, glass-fronted building "traditionalized" by a new façade replete with pedimented entrance, arched windows, and stone quoins. "Same box, different facade," Mrs. Huxtable writes, summing up the basic postmodernist formula. "Instead of modernizing, we have classicizing. At best, the result, and the response, is superficial and ambivalent."

Of course, we tend to get used to the buildings, even the bad buildings, we live with. One service performed by *Architecture, Anyone?* is to recall past indignities and remind us of various instances of architectural cynicism and urban exploitation. For example, in one of the book's best essays, "Wishful Thinking on Fifth Avenue," Mrs. Huxtable describes—anatomizes, really—two buildings on Fifth Avenue: Ulrich Franzen's apartment house at the corner of Sixty-first Street, and Philip Johnson and John Burgee's apartment house at 1001 Fifth Avenue, between Eighty-first and Eighty-second streets across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Built in the Seventies, both are modern buildings that pretend to harmonize with their expensive Beaux Arts context by including various stylized "references" to the surrounding architecture. Thus Mr. Franzen's building—on the site of the old Dodge Mansion—boasts a five-story "false front" stone façade replete with fake quoins and a "balustrade" of holes, while the Johnson and Burgee building bristles with pseudo-classical moldings and a roof that is "mansard" in front and bare behind. It is rather like fitting a Volkswagen with an imitation Rolls Royce grill. Both buildings illustrate what Mrs. Huxtable describes as the Architectural Pathetic Fallacy. "This particular fallacy," she writes,

> operates on the principle that if you are going to put an out-of-scale, out-of-context, discordant structure into a setting where it will be damaging or destructive, you can make it less so by "recalling," or "extracting" the essence or details of the surrounding older architecture. Borrowing from the existing for the new is supposed to make the two incompatible structures compatible.

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> In actual practice, this is almost always hogwash, with results ranging from well-intentioned bungling to pious hypocrisy . . . . One can point to the compromise and say that two buildings "go together" because they share a common cornice line, or related material or color. One is supposed to admire the way the addition "picks up" themes or motifs from its neighbors, no matter how it violates them in its totality. This kind of design usually gets high marks from those protecting the integrity of a landmark or the scale and character of a neighborhood. But answers meant to satisfy all camps seldom do, and compromise in architecture can be compared to the work of the committee assigned to design a horse that comes up with a camel.

Not all of the essays in *Architecture, Anyone?* achieve this degree of critical perspicacity. Nor, indeed, do they all concern themselves with such central questions of architectural style. Some of the more occasional pieces—on "The Death of the Five-and-Ten," "Conquering Clutter," or "The Decorative Urge"—descend to a kind of drawing-room coziness that can be quite charming but that lacks the incisiveness and critical penetration of the book's best essays. Then again, many of the essays show Mrs. Huxtable as the embattled advocate of urban preservation and critic of untethered real-estate development. There is something almost heroic about many of these pieces, dramatizing as they do the battle of individuals and neighborhoods against the rude imperatives of big business. But one senses at times that the depressing spectacle of New York real-estate development has all but monopolized Mrs. Huxtable's best energies. Not that most of us are likely to disagree with her position on individual controversies. Preserving the integrity of East Sixty-second Street, preventing St. Bartholomew's from ruining one of the last patches of open space on Park Avenue, saving Grand Central Terminal from the wrecker's ball: these are worthy causes all. Yet one cannot but feel that her increasing attention to these preservationist controversies has distracted her from her role, her work, as a critic.

The nature of this distraction—or divided allegiance—is perhaps best illustrated in the introduction that Mrs. Huxtable provides for *Architecture, Anyone?* Taking issue with the utopianism that has been an ingredient of so much of our century's most ambitious architecture, she writes that "[h]istory consists of holding actions"—meaning that nothing essential changes, that the constituent elements, motivations, and ends of architecture, as of life, are constant. But she speaks on the next page of the "radical change in the way people see and respond to their surroundings" that the last decades have wrought, a change that she goes on to describe as a "revolution." There is, shall we say, a tension between the idea of history as a "holding pattern" and the adduced "revolution": one points to a kind of traditionalism, the other tokens a commitment to the modernist project that no "holding pattern" can accommodate. It is not clear that *Architecture, Anyone?* ever resolves this tension, though it is the book's great virtue to remind us that such problems are still worth addressing. Ada Louise Huxtable stopped writing criticism regularly in 1982; the best parts of *Architecture, Anyone?* demonstrate that she has had no successor.

Tales from the other side

Julien Gracq The Opposing Shore.
Columbia University Press,
320 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

The word *surrealist* is appropriate here, in one of its few current applications: a French schoolteacher, Julien Gracq (born Louis Poirier) was an admiring companion of the poet André Breton, the founder of literary Surrealism. Gracq wrote a book-length appreciation of that "saint of poetry," its first edition, in 1948, illustrated with a frontispiece by Hans Bellmer. Julien Gracq's

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writings may be, finally, the only truly successful works of serious fiction written under Breton's direct influence. Of them, *The Opposing Shore (Le Rivage des Syrtes)* is the best known among French readers.

Gracq's books are finely crafted intellectual puzzles, dense with perceptiveness, complex in fantasy and language, and stimulating even to a reader of cultivated taste. If only by virtue of its ability to command one's full intellectual respect, *The Opposing Shore*—originally published in France in 1951 and now published in its first English edition by Columbia University Press—has almost nothing in common with the familiar "fantasy" genre, both in its highbrow (Umberto Eco) and lowbrow (science-fiction) forms. Indeed, "nothing in common" ("rien de commun") is the motto that appears in the somewhat esoteric trademark of Gracq's French publisher, José Corti. Gracq's books, for the most part, are not truly novels: rather, they are extended Surrealist prose poems, mixing elements of dream, myth, and personal obsession, evoked with a special linguistic sonority that recalls Celtic and Norse literature.

The Opposing Shore is set in a landscape reminiscent of a de Chirico painting: a maritime outpost, Syrtes, maintained by the Venice-like empire of Orsenna in its eternal war with the Asiatic barbarians of Farghestan. To the fortress at Syrtes comes Aldo, a young representative of Orsenna's intellectual elite. He is charged with a naval mission involving inspection of the Syrtes facilities; but he is also burdened with a special sense of fatedness, a self-conscious, self-dramatizing awareness of his own destiny. The principal symbol of the book becomes the invisible naval boundary between Orsenna and Farghestan, a limit that is marked by the fortress Aldo is assigned to inspect. His assignment serves as the occasion for a sustained meditation on the classic question of late Surrealism: "Have you ever thought much about . . . the Other Side?" As corny as this question may sound, and as overheated as the book's rhetoric may sometimes be, Gracq is never jejune or obvious in the development of his narrative.

Rather than "unfolding," to use the hoary cliché, Gracq's tales could be said to "unwind." In successive encounters with the mysteries of the marine fortress, Aldo explores the reality of the invisible border with the enemy state and its power over his existence. Each of his experiences—with a map, with a landscape, with a friend—is presented as a problem, the solution of which leads to further "involvement" with the fortress as a privileged place, and then to new clues. But these intellectual puzzles don't offer clear solutions: their yield is one of psychological insight rather than explanation. The sum of Aldo's meditative experiences brings us to the core of the book: an understanding of frontiers and of restrictions, of transgression and freedom, as fundamental motifs manifest in all existence.

Gracq has long declared his admiration for the German writer Ernst Jünger, particularly for that author's *On the Marble Cliffs,* a fantastical account of a dream country that is obviously a disguised Nazi Germany. The marine fortress at Syrtes is poised on the line between hereditary enemies in a non-shooting war, and therefore may stand, in the same way as Jünger's book, for France during the last years of the 1930s and the "phony war" of 1939-40. (Gracq treated the 1939-40 war in his only realistic novel, published in English decades ago, *Balcony in the Forest.*) Further, it may apply to the post-1945 world, divided between powers whose conflicts seem to have become hopelessly formalistic.

Gracq's idea of underpinning *The Opposing Shore* with a complicated but serious game does not seem particularly noteworthy in a literary world accustomed to "difficult" novels with a great many underpinnings, and now to a critical focus on this kind of writing under the rubric of postmodernism. But, and let us admit it, very little of this sort of experimentation really succeeds, at least with a reader who expects something more than fashionable obscurity. What sets Gracq apart is, first, the gracefulness of the writing, the lucidity of the narrative, the easy flow and poetic power of the discourse, here

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translated masterfully into English by Richard Howard. Second, the Surrealist "magic" in the book really works: Gracq is a good enough thinker, with enough integrity and self-respect, to make the intellectual and moral maze within which his characters trace their steps seem authentic and necessary.

Every few pages, *The Opposing Shore* bursts forth with a phrase or a paragraph that inspires a second or third reading. "We rode along for hours on this sleepy terrain," Gracq writes. "From time to time a gray bird exploded out of the reeds and vanished high in the sky, quivering like a tiny ball on top of the fountain at the very crest of its monotonous cry." Like his mentor Breton, Gracq draws on an exceptional sense of the special powers of language. His ability to *create* landscape—not merely to describe it, but to make manifest a tableau in a way that is immediate and moving—is prodigious. For example: "A secret was attaching me to the fortress, like a child to some hiding place discovered among ruins. Early in the afternoon, under the scorching sun, an emptiness declared itself within the Admiralty at the hour when most of us were taking naps . . . . A long vaulted corridor, then wet and disjointed stairs led me to the inner redoubt of the fortress; the chill of a tomb immediately enveloped me as I entered the map room."

The Surrealist theory of "verbal alchemy" which Gracq imbibed through Breton displays itself best in the many short prose strophes that suddenly emerge as autonomous, integral elements in Gracq's text, reaching toward a culminating word or phrase with a distinct linguistic or poetic resonance. Gracq will begin almost prosaically by describing, for instance, "Marino's gray and inattentive gaze, that gaze whose heavy intensity seemed to focus not on the face, but somewhere imperceptibly beyond, [which] again passed before my eyes at that moment like an inflexible datum to which I could not help referring in my behavior, since our first meeting, that was faltering and decisive." But then: "There was not a word, not a gesture of this life without mystery which I would not have tried in spite of myself to conceal from him, not a moment when I had not felt, before him, *at fault* . . . . Something secret and monkish hovered about this room which had ultimately seemed to coil itself around him like a shell around its conch, and where his imposing seated figure merely added a finishing touch, consummating a remarkable masterpiece of *placement.*"

A certain integrity is perhaps a key component here. It is largely unknown in the United States that the Surrealist writers associated with André Breton very early on abandoned their post-adolescent forays into cultural gangsterism: they were the first writers on the Left in France, along with André Gide, to denounce Stalin, which they did as early as 1935. They settled instead into a somewhat conservative literary mode, stressing a nearly reactionary conception of beauty and an unmodernist belief in the grandeur of language and the nobility of letters. Along with a rejection of political cant (Stalinism) and literary fads (including those promoted by Sartre) there went, after 1945, a special contempt *chez Breton* for "the literary racetrack" as it existed then and continues to exist in France and elsewhere. In a stance that ironically recapitulated their youthful Dadaist hatred for the public, Breton and his friends firmly turned their backs on the (now leftish-tinged) glory conferred by prize committees, critics, and France's special caste of literary and artistic journalists.

It should have been no surprise, then, that in 1951, when Gracq was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *The Opposing Shore,* he bluntly refused it. It was an act that followed logically from a long essay he had recently published entitled "La littérature a l'estomac," which dissected the Parisian politics of literary corruption. (The title is virtually untranslatable, but means approximately "Literature for the Belly.") This essay, which has endured as an example of the French literary diatribe, has also stood rather well as an analysis of the conflict between an educated taste and the influence of the "crowd state"

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in intellectual life. Gracq, who refers to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a "correspondence course on sexuality" (a phrase that accurately captures the superficiality and vulgarity of the whole Sartre-de Beauvoir ménage), goes on to describe the arrival of the existential horde in the precincts of literary Paris. His account could apply equally to the conquests of critical ground by those kindred legions of today, the "structuralists" and "deconstructionists":

> A friend who used to edit a literary review confided to me one day how alarmed he was by the rising tide of shapeless Jaspersian, Husserlian, and Kierkegaardian "pieces" that beat against his door: a whole famished tribe, who had been held back at the frontier, were coming through the gap—with arms and baggage, with their own manners and customs, their own entertainments and their own language—Academic—that the inhabitants could not speak—determined to settle as conquerors on the lands of the general public, so much fatter than their own barren heaths. It is true that the gates were closed again very soon, when saturation point had been reached, but already a strange fauna with curious habits had colonised literature, which now seemed to fluctuate, thanks perhaps to some secret, sliding panel, between the outhouse and the *Review of Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* . . . . One begins to wonder if we have not returned to the days when the people venerated "sacred writings" in proportion as they were convinced that the very wealth of their obscene symbolism was in itself a proof of the presence of an esoteric meaning that would forever elude them. Contrary to what is generally thought, the provocative scatology in the modern novel could not be removed from it without disastrous results: the public looks upon it as nothing less than the sign of mystery; it is a fetish, a charm which hypnotizes, like Père Ubu's toilet brush. And the public's comic way of reacting to the disagreeableness of the proffered gift is worthy of inclusion in the rich gallery of specimens of insane collective behavior inaugurated by our century: its name is the "living room dance."[1]

Gracq's defense of a kind of literary occultism is miraculously free of a cloying preciosity, as well as of "supernatural" affectations. In opposition to a literature with functions somewhere near those of the Roman circus, he formulates a mode of writing that fully challenges the philosophical and aesthetic capacities of an ideal reader. Like Aldo in *The Opposing Shore,* that reader is offered a means of participating in an interior state. Allegorically, he begins at the water's edge (where Gracq's invention begins) and then moves steadily to the heart of the mystery.

This process is at the core of all Gracq's work, beginning with his first success, published in 1938, *The Castle of Argol,* in which a remarkable drama of individual will and desire is played out in the environs of a castle. Gracq's settings are always exalted, even eroticized. As a good disciple of Breton he chose, through a sort of stylistic archeology, to place most of his stories in sites that are not only psychologically symbolic but also overtly poetical—for example, on the ramparts of castles like those in the original "Gothic" novels of Matthew Gregory Lewis and Charles Robert Maturin, or, as in the case of *The Opposing Shore,* in the surreal landscapes of the Italian "metaphysical school."

Early in the book Marino, the master of the fortress of Syrtes and Aldo's elderly authority figure, addresses the young adventurer as follows: "There's no need for imagination in Syrtes, let me tell you . . . . We defeat it here—we end up by wearing it out. You've seen the birds that run across the plains down here—the ones with atrophied wings. . . . Where there are no trees to perch on and no hawks to escape, there's no need to fly . . . . That's how we live here." In contrast, Julien Gracq's books themselves tell us that the bird of fantasy, of imagination, of a truly daring poetry and intellect, can perhaps survive without suffering the atrophy of its wings.

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1 This quotation from Gracq's essay is taken from the translation by John Weightman in *Transition,* number 6 (Paris, 1950).

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Notebook

Night comes to the Field Museum

by Victor M. Cassidy

Last year, at a panel discussion during the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums,[1] speakers debated the proper role of special effects—dramatic lighting, slides, video, and sound—in museum installations. Allon Schoener, a museum consultant and exhibition designer who is best known for mounting the "Harlem on My Mind" show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, spoke first.

"In 'Harlem on My Mind,' we made use of communications technology to interpret a cultural subject," Schoener stated. "Every space in the exhibition area had a sound track . . . and we used all of the communication equipment to pulse people as they moved through the space."

Schoener went on to say that interpretation, rather than presentation, is the task of museums today. Epcot, Disney's high-tech amusement park in Florida, epitomizes the future for him. "In this age of increasingly sophisticated communications technology," Schoener declared, "museums must be part of the contemporary world or they will vanish into oblivion."

Michael Spock, vice-president for Public Programs at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, also spoke. Museums exist to show objects, he said, and part of the current popularity enjoyed by such institutions stems from the fact that the public sees "the real thing" in them instead of the reproductions it gets from television, films, and other mass media. But an object brought to a museum, he pointed out, has invariably been torn from its original context. A part of it dies when it is put on display, he said. To restore some sense of this context, of the "lost reality," a museum may make judicious use of effects.

Spock cautiously qualified this endorsement. Too often in the past, he said, effects have been "poorly thought through and organized in a way that . . . [removed] the important elements of the experience of dealing with the real objects." Because effects can conflict and interfere with exhibits, museums should employ "the minimum," he concluded.

Michael Spock's views are especially important because he represents one of the great natural history museums of the world. The Field has more than sixteen million specimens and objects in its collections. There are thirty-two permanent exhibits in anthropology, botany, geology, and zoology, covering nine acres on three floors. Among the Field's collections are more than six hundred thousand art and ethnographic artifacts from Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

Because the Field is a world-class museum, its policies and activities have implications that extend far beyond Chicago. Professionals everywhere look to it for leadership, both

1 "Beyond the Artifact: Media as Surrogate Object" was held on June 12, 1986. Quotations are transcribed from a tape recording of the session.

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in research and museum practice. For better or for worse, they follow the Field.

The model which the Field is nowadays offering the museum world is, however, far closer in spirit to Allon Schoener's philosophy than to the cautious approach Michael Spock seemed to be advocating at the AAM panel in 1986. For some time now the distinguishing feature of its major exhibitions has been a theatrical mode of lighting. Exhibition halls are painted in dark colors, and objects are spotlighted from above in a manner that overdramatizes and distorts the objects being shown. They seem almost to leap out of the surrounding darkness.

In some cases such treatment seems appropriate. The Hall of Gems, for example, improved after it was painted black and provided with new cases in which light floods down upon the exhibits. After all, gems are small geological specimens whose primary appeal resides in their ability to capture and reflect light.

The trouble comes when the museum imposes similar lighting schemes on primitive art objects. Larger, subtler, and much more complex than gems, these require gentle overall illumination and the minimum of shadows. In the Field's new installation, however, they tend to be spotlighted in darkness, which makes them exciting to look at for a brief moment but impossible to study at length. Thus, instead of finding an appropriate way to light each class of object, the museum forces the same scheme upon them all—with destructive effects.

The show called "Gods, Spirits and People: The Human Image in Traditional Art"[2] is a flagrant example. This recently refurbished exhibition contains primitive art objects from all over the world. The works are intelligently chosen, mounted with great care, and then dumped in the dark.

"Gods, Spirits and People" places special emphasis on art in its social context. According to Robert Feldman, the exhibition's curator, the purpose of the show is "to focus on human images that were used to maintain a group's social cohesion. None of the pieces is purely decorative."

To illustrate his theme, Feldman selected one hundred and thirty-nine artifacts. Some came from "The Human Image in Primitive Art," the Field's earlier show; some were borrowed from storage; and five were purchased. Many of the objects have never been seen in public before.

The primary exhibition area has thirty-one display cases containing six kinds of artifacts roughly grouped together: funeral and memorial figures; ancestor figures; representations of spirits and deities; authority and rank figures; images relating costume or body decoration to social status; and masks. Directly adjoining this hall are eight additional cases with pieces that illustrate different ways of looking at people; e.g., realism vs. stylization; body decoration; and representations of foreigners.

All objects in the show are of high quality. The best are marvelously energetic and inventive. Of particular interest is the Tlingit raven rattle which a shaman carried as he danced. The rattle was said to be so powerful that it would fly from the shaman's hand if he did not hold it upside down. Other delights include tree fern figures from Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides), a tortoiseshell funeral mask made in the Torres Straits Islands between Australia and Papua, and a carved emaciated figure from Easter Island.

Similar pleasures await any visitor who contrives a way to defeat the design of this show and manages to see the work. The ceiling and walls of the exhibition space are uniformly black; small spotlights on tracks point down through the transparent tops of the Plexiglas cases to illuminate the artifacts within. The casual visitor receives vivid first impressions from "Gods, Spirits and People," but the more demanding viewer is soon frustrated. Gratuitous shad-

2 This special exhibition opened on November 22, 1986 and will run through 1987. It replaces "The Human Image in Primitive Art," a roughly similar show that was assembled during the Sixties.

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Daniel Dallmann

Recent Paintings *March 7-April 1, 1987*

Construction Site, 1985, oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery ***50 W 57 NY 10019***

ows abound; the eye rapidly tires of squinting into the gloom and adjusting constantly between areas of darkness and light.

Robert Feldman explains that the ceiling was painted black "to hide it" and that the light fixtures have filters to block out ultraviolet rays that damage artworks. Fluorescent lamps, which illuminate display cases in many areas of the museum, are inexpensive, he stated, but emit light that has harmed specimens and artifacts.

It is entirely possible to protect objects of this sort without displaying them in semi-darkness. Roughly two years ago, the Art Institute of Chicago remounted its own primitive collection, moving it to a windowless space from an area where sunlight threatened harm. The Art Institute also illuminates objects with track-hung filtered spotlights, but because walls and ceiling are pale, the exhibition hall feels spacious and the works can be studied with ease.

A disastrous example of the Field's design-installation policy is the permanent exhibition called "Maritime Peoples of the Arctic and Northwest Coast," remounted in 1981. One struggles to see anything at all in this horribly designed exhibition.

This is all very sad, for the quality of Eskimo and Coast Indian artifacts in this show can only be called amazing. Hundreds of pieces are displayed, including boats, kitchen utensils, baskets, garments, religious objects, masses of masks, and about a dozen totem poles. Dioramas show how the people lived. Contemporary native carvers have replicated a traditional Coast Indian house just for this exhibition. As a show of art and ethnology, "Maritime Peoples" is truly a tour de force.

But here again the designers intervene, interposing disfiguring effects between the objects and the viewing public. Black paint is splashed everywhere, creating an ambient murk that frustrates the eye. On most display cases there are lighting devices that provide virtually no illumination until the viewer steps in front of the case to activate a switch beneath the carpet. If the lights come

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on (often they do not, for the fancy devices break down constantly), the visitor may look at the exhibits. But the spotlighting is often so incompetent that some artifacts receive no illumination at all and others are lit on one side only. And since most spots hang inside the cases at the top, objects receive steeply raked light which casts heavy shadows.

Totem poles are mounted atop a four-foot-high platform and dimly lit so they loom melodramatically out of the darkness as a visitor approaches. Here, visibility and accuracy have both been sacrificed for design. A photograph on the side of the platform shows the totem poles in their original context—set flush to the earth in front of an Indian dwelling. What the public is expected to learn from such a misleading and contradictory display is a mystery.

In the "Maritime Peoples" exhibition, videotape players show films of Indian life: hunting, fishing, ceremonies, and the like. Though these presentations are instructive, they run continuously, making a background din that never stops. Constant noise and claustrophobic gloom combine to give this exhibition the feel of a barroom. It's certainly no place to look at art or to learn anything.

Other halls in the museum are just as badly lighted, and recent touring shows have received similar treatment. But until recently, at least, a determined visitor could still overcome the barriers of exhibition designs to see the Field's great collections.

No more. Over the past few years, without announcement or explanation, the Field has closed roughly thirty-five thousand square feet of permanent exhibition space: Hall A (Melanesia), Hall D (Madagascar), Hall E (Africa), Hall F (Polynesia), and Hall G (the Philippines and Java). Hall C (Prehistoric Peoples) may close soon. Most of this space is used to house the Field's rapidly growing administrative staff: its development, accounting, personnel, and public-education departments. (In the museum's organizational structure, the Development Division is given the same importance as Research and Collections.) So priorities have been turned on their heads and fundraisers now sit in space that once belonged to the public.

It is hard not to feel apprehensive about all this. The Field Museum is an old friend whose name evokes countless pleasant memories. But it now seems to be joining a trend among museums nationally in which grantsmanship and self-aggrandizement eclipse the original goals of scholarship and public service. The travesty of its current exhibition design is only a sign of things to come. A recent letter from the museum announces a "$40 million fundraising campaign" and ominously promises that future permanent exhibits will "reflect the most creative and sophisticated technology and presentation techniques."

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Letters

Rewriting American literary history

To the Editors:

I hope you will allow me to respond to James W. Tuttleton's remarks (in "Rewriting the History of American Literature," November, 1986) on my two collections of essays and on the projected multi-volume Cambridge History of American Literature. I take this opportunity to clarify certain important points which, to judge by the review, I failed to make plain.

First, Professor Tuttleton assumes that I do not share his belief in the true, the good, and the beautiful. I do. The problem is that literary historians have become aware that texts and other artifacts in which the true, the good, and the beautiful make themselves manifest are susceptible to controversy and bias, subject to the contradictions of language and the mind, and invested to varying degrees with the particular political, artistic, and intellectual processes of the societies in which they were produced. There is nothing new in this. Nor is this an expression of political radicalism, aesthetic reductionism, or moral relativism. It is simply historical awareness; and an awareness heightened in this case by the special circumstances in which American literary studies developed, including the controversy and bias that attended the reception of what we have come to call our national classics, from *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* through *Huckleberry Finn*. I should probably mention Washington Irving's writings as well, since Mr. Tuttleton's scholarship so clearly shows the value of the work of recovery and reassessment.

In this light, let me try to reassure Mr. Tuttleton about his misgivings. First, the forthcoming New Cambridge History of American Literature is not a conspiracy to dislodge "our best writers." To call into question is *to seek knowledge from,* not to dismiss or reject. To question the canon is to inquire into its structure and formation. I expect that in the New Cambridge History the inquiry will issue in a series of varied but apposite narratives about the development of our literary tradition. I also expect that the narratives will, to some extent, explore the tangled relations between expressive forms, considered in part as a function of history, and historical "background," considered in part as a function of imaginative expression; and that in the course of untangling those relations the contributors will find it important, as an integral part of their narratives, to account for their own functions as literary historians. All this may be more complicated than Mr. Tuttleton or I would like, but I can see no way around it. These are the complex terms in which the current generation of Americanists think of their subject, and self-reflexivity seems to me one of the hopeful signs of their "discourse." I have in mind now the current dissensus in literary studies, about which Mr. Tuttleton is unduly alarmed. We have no means, fortunately, to impose a Correct Way; but we do have an obligation—as Mr. Tuttleton himself suggests, quoting Emerson—to give expression to the variety of voices and approaches *at its representative best,* and the project will succeed to the extent that the contributors, without abandoning their distinctive views, can agree on the inherent partial-

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ity of those views and so enter into a productive dialogue among themselves.

I would like to treat Mr. Tuttleton's views in this manner. And I hope that, for his part, he will reconsider the plausibility of the New Cambridge History. I hope, too, that he will reconsider what seem to be his two major concerns about the work he reviewed, ideology and radicalism. In the first case, he simply misunderstood me. Ideology is a descriptive, not a pejorative term. It refers to the intricate web of ideas, symbols, and values by which culture, any culture, justifies its ways of life. As a rule, ideology not only upholds but tries to corner the market on the true, the good, and the beautiful. Not conspiratorially but naturally, as a matter of course, a culture, any culture, seeks to identify those ideals with its own, and to seal the identification by insinuating its own social norms (e.g., enterprise, democracy, progress, independence) into the definition of truth, goodness, and beauty. When Emerson envisioned a poetry of "the common man," he meant "mankind" by "man" and "cosmic" (or "essential") by "common." It does not in the least denigrate his vision—a vision as profound and humane as that offered by any other culture, past or present—to see within his strategy of universalization the ideologically shaped biases of politics and gender. Rather, it historicizes his outlook and renders his aesthetic techniques accessible to cognitive criticism.

Again, a brief definition may help clarify what was apparently a troublesome point. Cognitive criticism—cultural, ideological, or historical—is not in itself a threat to patriotism. It is a mode of understanding that tries to make "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" analysis—formalist and contextual perspectives—reciprocally enriching. Its purpose is neither to extol nor to debunk, though in the course of appreciation it may be said to advocate and in the course of analysis to unmask. It is true that in general this sort of criticism tends to focus on limitations of various sorts—limitations of nationality, of genre, of social resources, of tradition, and so on. But this does not necessarily imply an adverse relation to the literature. Limitations are problems, not solutions. Like frontiers, they may be either stopping points or points of departure. It depends on where you are bound.

No doubt Mr. Tuttleton knows all this. So I find it surprising that he misunderstands and actually misrepresents my argument. He says that I insist on using ideological analysis to unmask, whereas I argue, on the contrary, that it ought also to reveal the power and richness of the culture, and I elaborate on this with reference to several of the essays in *Ideology and Classic American Literature.* (Indeed, the explicit purpose of this volume, as Mr. Tuttleton does not say, is to convey the variety of possibilities opened by a concept which, despite its vagueness, has become increasingly important in literary criticism.) He quotes my remark that a work of art can "no more transcend ideology than an artist's mind can transcend psychology" without noting the qualification that precedes it: "certainly, a work of art transcends; it may be said to be trans-historical, or trans-cultural, or even trans-canonical." He quotes me as saying that language may "undermine the power structures it seems to reflect," but he fails to report that the purpose of this (rather obvious) remark is "to suggest that ideological analysis can help us to see more clearly, and to define more precisely, what we have percewived as being extraordinary, irreducible, and uncontained about our classic texts."

Now, this is serious misquoting. But I cite these examples (which could easily be extended) not to disparage a distinguished textual editor, but, in the American grain, to set the record straight. Above all, to repeat, I would like to make amends for whatever defects in my style or tone elicited Mr. Tuttleton's misrepresentations and misapprehensions. This applies most dramatically to his concern about the radicalism of the New Cambridge History. In the interests of brevity, let me enumerate a few errata: (1) I did not upbraid contributors for not being radical enough; rather, I outlined contradictory lines of radical analysis that have emerged in recent criticism. (2)The radical analysis of American culture is not the invention of the late 1960s: it is rooted in our literary tradition, and it was adopted, specifically by way of that tradition, by some of our best literary critics. It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that a certain form of radicalism is basic to the American way—a recurrent mode of social revitalization from the Founding Fathers (or earlier) to the leading public figures of the

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late 1960s, who effected major reforms in civil rights and various aspects of the academic curriculum, including American literary studies. (3) From either of these perspectives, it need not have alarmed Mr. Tuttleton to read that "for the most part" (*not* "in general") the essays in the *Ideology* volume fall "within the left wing of the political spectrum." A moment's reflection would have assured him that "left wing" in this context is a broad category ranging from "liberal" to various forms of Marxism (which is after all part of modern intellectual consciousness, like Freudianism or Darwinism); and an hour's research would have convinced him that there are essays in these volumes by writers who would feel comfortable in the pages of *The New Criterion*—among them, interestingly, one or two whose essays he cites. Can he have intended these citations as signals of un-Americanism?

In any case, I deliberately called attention to the left-wing *bias* in the hope of broadening the scope of debate; the essays themselves demonstrate the usefulness of ideological analysis in a variety of scholarly contexts, and the annotated bibliographies indicate its diverse applications in a variety of academic fields—anthropology (e.g., Clifford Geertz), social history (e.g., Bernard Bailyn), etc.—from which literary historians have often profited. In fact, apart from errata and misrepresentation, the only criticism I have of Mr. Tuttleton's review is that he did not consider the ideological dimensions of his own response. He asks at one point how tropes can be said to use historians. My answer is, by the historians' failure to gain a critical distance from the assumptions of the culture from within which they write. Hence Polybius, *History* (Book XVI): "That historians should give their country a break, I grant you; but not so as to state things contrary to fact." Such ideological considerations may not have made Mr. Tuttleton's review more beautiful, but they might well have brought it closer to the good and the true.

Sacvan Bercovitch
Cambridge, Massachusetts

James W. Tuttleton replies:

I am pleased to hear that Professor Bercovitch believes in the true, the good, and the beautiful. But I remain in dismay about his frankly radical project of rewriting American literary history from the counterculture's point of view. Let me respond to his criticism point by point.

First, I did not, in any cited passages, misquote him, although he misquotes me in his next to last paragraph (I did not write "in general" or quote him writing it). The cited material comes indeed from his published writings, though I did not reproduce his three essays *in toto*. What I did was to emphasize those passages where a radical revisionist literary history of America was promised. Perhaps Mr. Bercovitch would have preferred me to leave his accurately quoted views embedded in the mystifying prose that surrounds them. But I thought it useful to clear the air.

Second, he complains that I wrongly accused him of upbraiding his own contributors to *Ideology and Classic American Literature* for "not being radical enough." "Upbraid" is his word. I see him as disappointed that they didn't fully rise to the radical revisionism he calls for. For in the "Afterword" he laments that he cannot "claim that the essays here altogether avoid the peculiar traps embedded in the quest for 'America.'" Writing the history of American literature is full of "traps" for a historian like Mr. Bercovitch. The one that vexes him most is "the special genius of the rhetoric of American consensus, which is to co-opt the energies of radicalism: to absorb the very terms of opposition into the promise of the Now, the long-nurtured vision of Futurity that carries us forever back, through a procession of sacred landmarks . . . to the ideological premises of modern democratic liberalism." Modern democratic liberalism is, apparently, the enemy. Because his contributors show signs of entrapment in consensus thinking, he complains that "the authors here are closer than they acknowledge to the tenets of liberalism and the pressures of the academic shopping mall."

Third, I never said that the radical analysis of our literary tradition was "the invention of the late 1960s." While Mr. Berkovitch has an interest in the New Left, his call for a re-analysis of classic American literature from a radical perspective includes old as well as new variants of Marxist thought. A revisionist American literary history in Marxist terms—New Left or old—would show where America "went wrong," why it failed

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to realize the left-wing ideology's agenda for political, economic, and social change.

Fourth, while Marxism may "after all" be part of the modern intellectual consciousness, that fact has not guaranteed intelligence and objectivity in the description of politics, economics, or literature. How could it, since the revolutionary goal of destroying liberal democracy authorizes the corruption of learning and scholarship if it will serve the revolutionary purpose? In my judgment, wherever Marxist ideas have been implemented, the results have been dismal. In Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Cuba, and even now in China, the yearning *in every sphere of life* for the freedoms of liberal democracy is manifest. Marxist ideas seem to flourish nowadays in only two places: 1) in the academic world of privileged intellectuals who are totally out of touch with the actualities of world politics; and 2) in post-revolutionary "utopias," like those I have named, where Marxist ideas are sustained through totalitarian state violence against the citizenry.

No literary history, founded on an ideology of dissenting radicalism, will be as neutral or value-free as Mr. Bercovitch's letter makes it out to be. Now, I am not naïve enough to believe in a presuppositionless history. The issue for me is exactly the presupposition or prejudication on which a history will be based. From Polybius onward we have had histories in which the actualities of the past have been corrupted by the ideological prejudices of the historian—one of which, as the epigraph makes plain, is misguided nationalism. But one of the virtues of the older American consensus-based histories was that the views of ideological extremists were qualified and corrected by the appeal to fact and by the perspectives and attitudes of the larger group. Mr. Bercovitch claims that the forthcoming Cambridge history will give expression to a "variety of voices and approaches . . . ." But I do not see a true variety of voices and approaches in his group, though some are not sufficiently radical for him. This group of young Cambridge historians has been preselected by Mr. Bercovitch in order to rewrite American literary history from an anti-establishment perspective that will commend "discontinuity, disruption, dissensus." No wonder that a number of older American literary historians, many of them with different perspectives, scholars who have now amassed the erudition to write a new literary history, have felt shut out and have complained in professional meetings that a major press like Cambridge has been sold this bill of tainted goods.

Mr. Bercovitch remarks that his kind of "cognitive criticism" need neither extol nor debunk, though in the course of analysis it may unmask. But in fact Mr. Bercovitch regards the "American Way" as a "cultural myth," a "fiction" with "sinister effects." His "Afterword" makes it plain that to demystify the "American Way" is "to see through it, to expose its historical functions, necessarily from an extrinsic, and usually from a hostile, perspective" (p. 421). Mr. Bercovitch and his associates intend to use the trendy current nihilist ideology of deconstructionism as a means of asserting that all propositions about values, or about the past, are linguistic fictions. If he can show that the American Way, founded as it is on democratic liberalism, is just a fiction, then the ground will be cleared for the advent of the Marxist ideology he covertly espouses. Conservatives and liberal democrats will readily recognize this familiar left-wing attempt to sow confusion and doubt and will resist it accordingly. Is American liberal democracy a fiction with sinister effects? I don't think so.

I concur with F. H. Bradley, in *The Presuppositions of Critical History,* that the discovery and enunciation of historical truth is possible. What is required of the historian is both a proper regard for the testimony of the past and the transcension of his own necessarily contemporary horizon. If a tenaciously held ideology like Marxism prevents the historian from transcending his subjectivity, the result will be what Bradley calls "a vicious *a priori* dogmatism." In alerting readers to the ideological dogmatism promised by the Cambridge history, I reject Mr. Bercovitch's sly insinuation of McCarthyism. My very epigraph from Polybius makes clear that dogmatic histories of the kind Mr. Bercovitch promises are a timeless, a universal problem.

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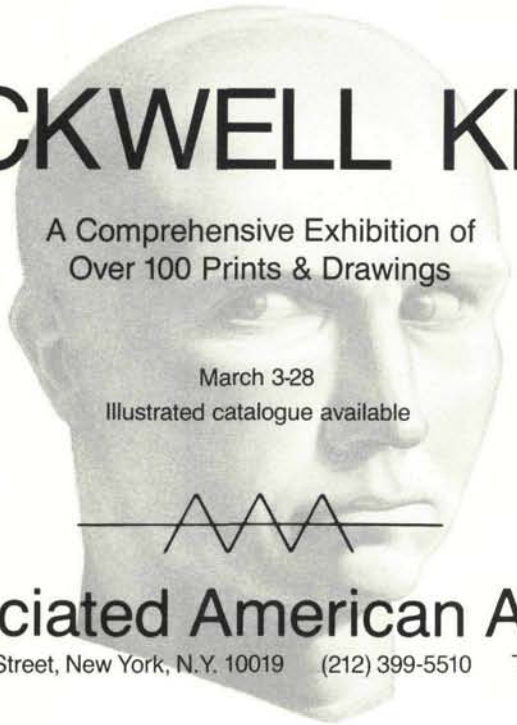

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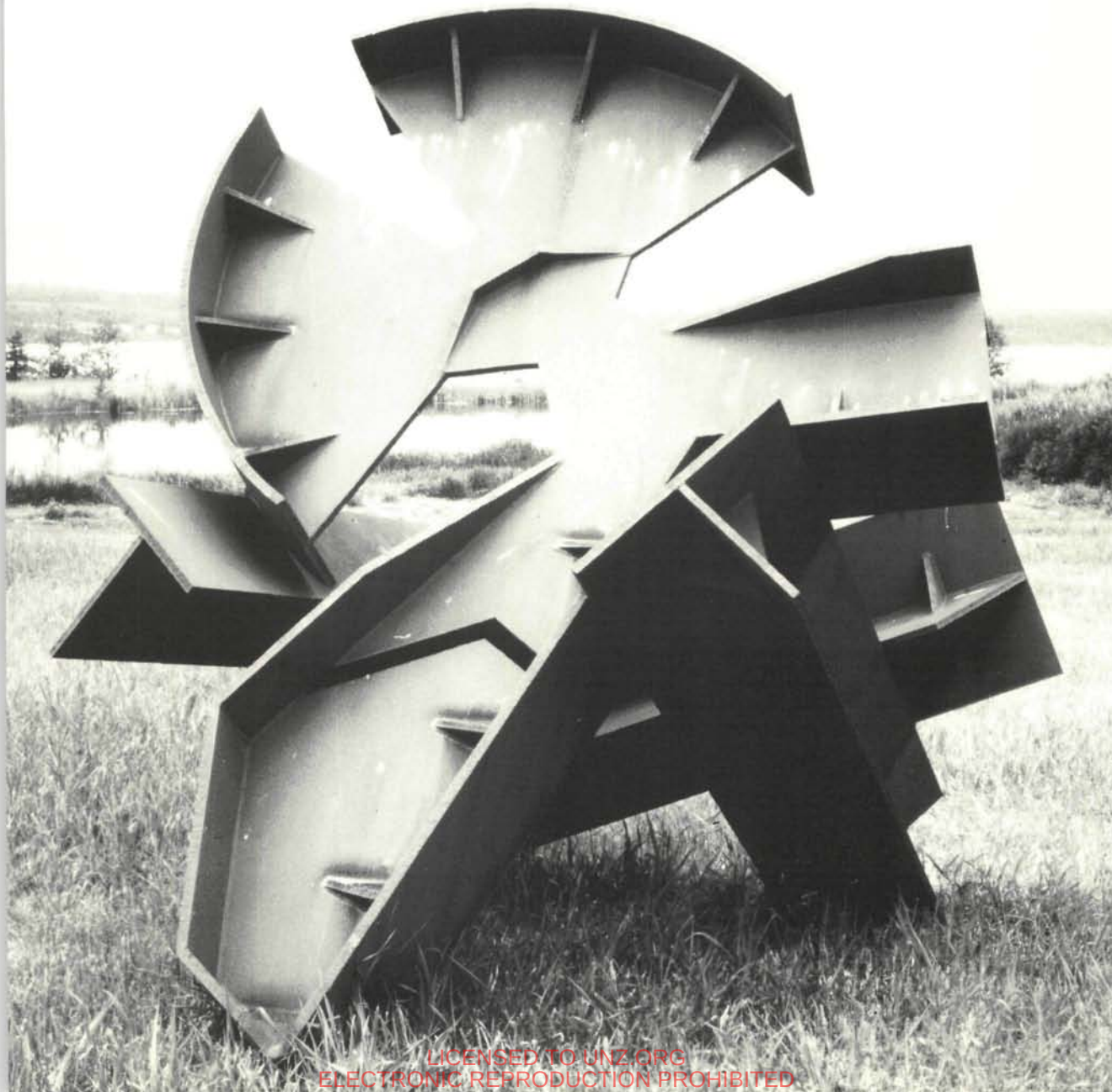

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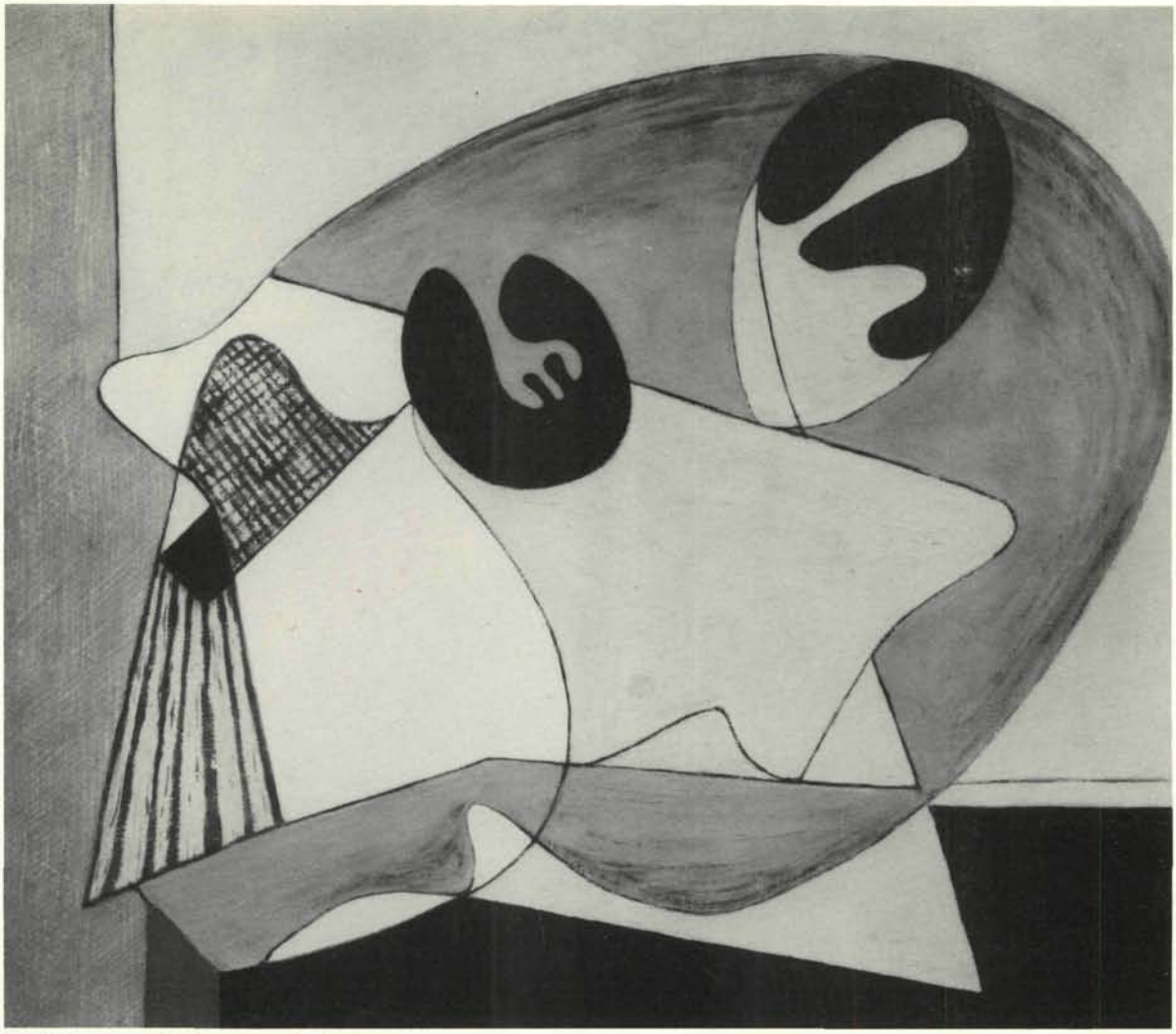

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